

**SPEECH BY
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"DIALOGUE AMONG CULTURES AND CIVILISATIONS" AT HELSINKI
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Mr. Chairman,

This Asia-Europe Summit Meeting is indeed an appropriate forum to address the need for "Dialogue Among Cultures and Civilizations" because both Asia and Europe are hosts to ancient civilizations and homes to the great religions of the world.

2. I propose to focus on the growing loss of trust and confidence between the Christian west and the Muslim world because the developing schism between the two sides is a very serious issue now affecting international peace and security.

3. We as political leaders should indeed take the lead in this dialogue. Only then would this dialogue be able to permeate to other levels of our societies. Trust and confidence must be established not only at the level of the international political leadership but also at the level of religious leaders, civil society, scholars, educationists and the youth of the world, just to name a few.

4. But first, we must all accept the fact that the crisis of confidence I am referring to transcends religion. Religious intolerance may present itself as the most glaring manifestation of the schism that is developing between the west and the Muslim world but the factors which have brought about this schism are more complex. They include strategic foreign policy calculations and other international machinations. Therefore, while the issue of religion may feature prominently in current international affairs, the problem is larger and deeper.

5. The military actions against Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq and most recently Lebanon have all been carried out in the name of the war against terrorism. But the Muslim world sees them as the humiliation of Muslim countries and Muslim societies. We must accept the fact that this sense of being humiliated lies at the core of the loss of trust and confidence which is worsening. If we do not accept this fact, we might be neglecting the truth and the schism will grow even deeper.

6. My country Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural country. However, Islam is respected by all the people as the official religion. The government which I now lead has embarked on a program to communicate a proper appreciation of Islam as a force for good. We call the approach Islam Hadhari, which is actually an approach for achieving a progressive society that is compatible with modernity yet firmly rooted in the noble values and injunctions of Islam. The approach has been accepted by everyone in Malaysia because underlying the whole message of Islam Hadhari is a call for equitable development and progress. It is a call for moderation

and tolerance as well as the assurance of justice and fairness for all irrespective of their faiths.

7. The point I am making is that Islam the religion is not the source of intolerance between peoples of different faiths. In fact, one of the fundamental teachings of Islam is the requirement to respect other religions. The Holy Quran contains this commandment by God. We must not confuse the words and deeds of a small number of extremists, who operate within the fringes of Muslim societies, as a reflection of Islamic culture.

8. I am afraid there is insufficient appreciation in the west of the role of religion in the lives of Muslims. Modern Europe has generally embraced secularism and largely removed religion from the public domain into the confines of the home and family. For the Muslims, Islam is their way of life, both public and private. I suggest that much of the misunderstandings between the Christian west and the Muslim world arise out of this fundamental misunderstanding about the place of religion in the daily lives of Muslims all over the world. When dealing with Muslims, you cannot separate them from their religion because that is their way of life.

9. It is accepted however that the Muslim ummah, which is a collective term identifying all adherents of the religion of Islam, do have some internal problems to solve. They must renounce extremism, eradicate radicalism and stop all sectarian violence. This can be done because Islam can tap into its own rich intellectual tradition and challenge directly the extremist doctrines which have become linked, quite unjustifiably, to this great religion. Muslim leaders and scholars must succeed in reviving fully the true spirit and the true teachings of Islam. The truth must prevail that Islam abhors and condemns terrorism.

10. However, the Muslim ummah acting alone will not be able to achieve total success. Islamophobia must be removed at the same time. I am keenly aware that we meet today on the anniversary of September Eleven (11). But we must not allow the politics of fear to continue dominating the relations between peoples and nations. The gulf and misunderstanding between the western world and the Muslim world must be bridged. However, it would require nothing less than the courage and commitment, by both sides, to face-up to previous wrongs and the conviction that they need to be put right.

11. In my country Malaysia, we have become especially appreciative of the need for tolerance and harmony in a diverse society such as ours after one bitter experience in 1969 when the country was embroiled in racial troubles. We determined that the root cause was economic imbalances between communities and we immediately took corrective actions. We also placed emphasis on education because with education comes success, progress and enlightenment. We are therefore optimistic that, given the necessary political will, the experience of countries like Malaysia can be repeated on a wider scale. If we are able to view the world as one community, made up of various ethnic and religious groups, and learn from the experiences and sacrifices made by multiethnic and multi-religious societies, then I believe we would be well

on-track in establishing peaceful co-existence between the different cultures and civilizations in the world.

Thank you.