

The Opening Ceremony Of The 27th Islamic Conference Of Foreign Ministers (ICFM)

The Palace Of The Golden Horses, Kuala Lumpur 27 June 2000

On behalf of the Government and people of Malaysia, I have great pleasure in extending a warm welcome to all delegates to the 27th Session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM) in Kuala Lumpur. I hope that you will have a pleasant stay and a fruitful meeting here.

2. I am particularly honoured to be given the opportunity to address this august gathering and to officially declare open the 27th Session of the ICFM this morning.

3. The theme of the Conference, Islam and Globalisation, is most timely as Muslim countries, members of the OIC and Muslims in general, prepare to face the challenges of globalisation in the new millennium.

4. Permit me to say a few words about globalisation, a concept which is already here with us and one which Malaysia has had the misfortune to experience lately and has found that it is not as it is made out to be a system and concept that is supposed to enrich the world including developing countries like us. On the contrary the financial system of the globalised world almost bankrupted us, almost made us paupers and beggars, almost placed us under the direction of foreign powers whose agenda is not the same as ours and certainly is not Islamic.

5. But before talking about globalisation specifically, may I point out that to prepare ourselves for the challenges of the future we have firstly to audit the present and study the past. I am sure that if we do so we will be able to avoid the mistakes of the present and the past and be able to handle the future with a greater degree of skill. History has shown over and over again that the mistakes we make through the ages are rather similar and as a result we keep on paying the same price. We never seem to learn.

6. Let us take tribal fanaticism for example. When Islam came to the Arabs they were a divided people with fanatical loyalty to their tribes. And because of this they were never at peace and they remained the most backward people. Islam united them and stopped their endless tribal wars. And they became the most powerful people able to spread the message of Islam from China in the East to Spain in the West, from the frigid regions of the Central Asian steppes to the lush forests of Tropical Asia and Africa. In the process a huge Muslim Empire and civilisation was built.

7. Adhering to the teachings of Islam to seek knowledge, the early Muslims took over the sciences, the mathematics, the arts of previous civilisations, developed and expanded them until the Muslim civilisation which developed became the most learned, knowledgeable, advanced and the most powerful. In Muslim countries industries were started which produced the best products from steel

and other metals, timber, glass and other raw materials. Muslims built ships which sailed to the far corners of the world, to trade, to settle and to proselytize. Caravans of camels, horses and donkeys carried trade goods between the cities of China and the cities of Europe.

8. Research in medicine put the Muslims ahead of everyone else in this field and laid the foundation for modern medicine. Great cities were built equipped with great libraries and universities. Trained warriors clad in light chain mail, defeated the heavily armoured armies of Europe and gave protection to Muslim countries and communities. The Muslim Empire was a world power and Muslims were treated with respect everywhere.

9. The civilisation that the Muslims built lasted for many centuries and was the greatest in the history of mankind. It seemed that it would last forever. It seemed that Islam would be the dominant religion of the world. Large numbers of Spanish Catholics and Chinese Buddhists had accepted Islam and more seemed likely to do so.

10. But the process of world Islamisation was halted because the Muslims began to revert to their pre- Islamic ways. They began to quarrel and fight each other, setting up little kingdoms, rejecting their loyalty to Islam in favour of loyalty to their local rulers and states. They became engrossed with the interpretations and formulation of Islamic laws and they quarreled over who was right and who was wrong. Each tried to outdo the others in their religious fervour. They rejected the pursuit of knowledge other than those concerned purely with the Islamic religion. And they failed to notice the changes that were taking place in Europe, changes brought about by the knowledge the Europeans acquired from the Muslims, changes which later led to the Industrial Revolution.

11. And so when the Industrial Age came the Muslims had no part in it. In fact they rejected it as the creation of the Devil. Muslim industries regressed, their hand crafted products unable to challenge those of Europe. The unfortunate thing is that the Muslims faced a need to use the products of Western industries. Certainly they needed the modern weapons that the West developed.

12. The Quran had enjoined on the Muslims to be prepared to frighten and fight their foes with war steeds and the weapons of defence. Preoccupied with their endless debates regarding Islamic laws and practices, the Muslims neglected their defences completely. No people can defend themselves if they have to procure their weapons from their enemies. Over time the Muslim armies weakened and their territories fell into non-Muslim hands one by one.

13. The Spanish re-conquered Spain and expelled the Muslims to Africa. Even there they were not safe. The Spaniards followed them, conquered their lands and placed them under Spanish rule.

14. In Eastern Europe, the Empire of the Ottomans went through the same process. Neglecting the quest for knowledge and failing to realise the impact of the Industrial Revolution which had made powerhouses of the European nations;

concerned whether the European trousers and peak caps were Islamic or not, the Great Turkish Empire became unable to defend itself. Instigated by the British and the French, the Arab subjects of the Turkish Empire collaborated with the enemies of Islam to liberate themselves from Turkish rule. And when the dust settled on the remains of the Turkish Muslim Empire, the Arabs found that they had exchanged Turkish rule for British and French rule. Even Turkey proper came under Greek rule and could have remained so till today.

15. The lessons that should be learnt from the history of the Muslim people and the Muslim Empire are many. Certainly the first would be that Islamic brotherhood as enjoined by Islam is the sine qua non of survival and success. Certainly there is a need to read i.e. to study to seek knowledge. This was the first sentence that was given to Muhamad s.a.w. At that time what was there for Muhamad to read except the writings of those scholars before Islam. To read was to study and as we know the early Muslim scholars studied the writings of the Greeks and the other ancient scholars. And because they followed the injunctions of Islam, the early Muslims were learned and skillful in the conduct of war and peace and succeeded in spreading the teachings of Islam and winning adherents and territories.

16. But if we look at the present it is quite clear that we have learnt nothing from our past. We, the Muslims are far from being brothers. Today we are more divided than ever. Many of our countries are at war with each other. And within each country we are also unable to unite, to set up strong progressive Governments. If we practise democracy at all we use Islam to divide rather than to unite and we weakened ourselves and our Governments.

17. As to the quest for knowledge, clearly we are behind the rest of the world. Knowledge other than Islamic knowledge, is condemned by many of us as secular and we are urged to reject them. Some of us have to emigrate in order to acquire knowledge and as a result others benefit from the skills our people developed.

18. And because of this we cannot develop our countries, we cannot industrialise, we cannot compete with even the newer developed countries. Even the exploitation of our natural wealth depends on others.

19. Now the Industrial Age is giving way to the Information Age. Non-Muslims see opportunities from the new technologies and are busy exploiting them. Their industrial hegemony is being amplified many times by their dominance in the application of information.

20. They have introduced the idea of a world without borders, of a global nation. Their propaganda machine has ensured that this idea is universally accepted. Not to accept it would make us out to be recalcitrant, out-dated, living in the past. And so we Muslims are forced to join the chorus in praise of globalisation.

21. Do we know what we are accepting? We may know something but certainly not fully.

22. In all humility I would like to claim that Malaysia knows a little more than most other Muslim countries. But what we know, and what we have experienced have made us wary about the great promises made by the advocates of globalisation.

23. I doubt that we can reverse the process but knowing the idea, the concept and what it can and has done to us has made us more cautious and helped us to prepare ourselves for the challenges that will come in the name of globalisation.

24. As I said Malaysia has had some bitter experience with the borderless world. Merely by devaluing our currency we can be made so poor that we may be forced to compromise our independence. Many would have thought that under such threat, we the Muslims of this country, would have closed ranks to defend ourselves. But instead a large section of the Muslims in Malaysia are too preoccupied with the quest for power to appreciate the gravity of the situation or to be thankful that we have been able to fend off an attempt to colonise us.

25. We Malaysians have barely managed to extricate ourselves this time. But that has only made our people more complacent and in fact less appreciative of their good fortune. And so we remain divided and will get progressively weaker. And the old story of Muslim disunity and concern over minor differences in the practice of Islam will continue to frustrate our attempts to achieve 'hassanah' in this world.

26. The most significant change brought about by Information Technology is the Internet. Suddenly new ways of doing everything has become possible. The spread of knowledge is now unstoppable. But information is not always about knowledge. It is also about muck and filth and unmitigated lies spread by people wishing to undermine the development of human society, including the Muslim 'ummah'.

27. You may be surprised to know that 50 per cent of the business transactions on the Internet is about pornography. While we Muslims cover up our bodies in pious obedience to our religion, we are being tempted to download the filthiest pictures, still and moving, from the Internet. Our morals, those of our children, the future generations are being subverted so that the profession of Islam will become meaningless. And we do not know enough about the technology or the methods to counter this.

28. In business direct consumer to supplier communication has resulted in direct sales and delivery. Where before goods were imported in bulk by trading houses and distributed through local retailers, now goods come in small parcels direct to consumers from dot-com companies 12,000 miles away. The importers, distributors and retailers are all by-passed and will be largely wiped out. Governments can no longer collect import duties or corporate taxes. What will happen to our businesses, our workers and our Governments is not difficult to imagine.

29. In anticipation of the opening up of the markets of the world by the WTO, the banks and the industries of the rich industrialised nations are ganging up.

Mergers and acquisitions have made them so big that sovereign states are comparable only to a department of these giant corporations. They will be able to swallow up all the tiny banks, industries and businesses that we possess. In the end we will become like the banana republics where the managers of the plantations are more powerful than the Presidents of these countries. At that stage, de facto we will no longer be independent. The situation which prevailed in the first half of the last century will return.

30. These are some of the things that can come with globalisation. Is Islam or the Muslims prepared to prevent these things from happening? The answer is a resounding no. We were not able to face the challenges of the Industrial Age. We are even less able to face the Information Age. Technologically backward and economically poor we will slide further and further into depending on others for everything that we need. And we will be bullied and harassed and divided against ourselves. We will not be much of a part of the governance of the global nation, of that we can be certain.

31. In frustration some of our people, or even some of the Muslim nations, will resort to indiscriminate and wild acts. We will be called terrorists and our countries condemned as the bases for terrorist attacks. What we achieve with such acts will be nothing more than minor irritations. But the punishment they will mete out to us will be terrible for all our people. We will then get angry with each other and our brave people will attack us because we fail to fight for the Muslims as they claim they are fighting. But we know that with our present capacity, our total dependence on arms from the very people who oppress us; we know that open war against those who oppress us would achieve nothing. At this very moment they can, if they want to, wipe out the Muslims and their countries from the surface of this earth. If they haven't done so it is not because they care for us.

32. It seems that in the globalised world of the Information Age we are going to be even worse off than we were in the Industrial Age. It seems that the best thing for us to do is to turn our backs on this world for surely we will find our kingdom in the next.

33. I am not sure that we will. I am not sure that the `akhirat' will be ours to enjoy. I think that by failing to develop the Muslim countries, by failing to defend them and the Muslim people, we are committing even greater sins which our personal devotion to the daily rituals of our faith will not absolve us. If this world is for others then why did the early Muslims learn the arts and the sciences and skills of war and so spread the religion worldwide. It would have been better for them if they had only ensured their place in the next world instead of entering into worldly struggles to spread the teachings of Islam. If they had believed like present day Muslims many of us in this room would not be Muslims today. Praise be to Allah, Alhamdulillah, the early Muslims followed the true teachings of Islam.

34. Everyday we pray for `hassanah' in this world and in the next. Never do we pray for `hassanah' in the next world only. This world is not created by Allah for the non-believers only; this world is not created so the believers would be

backward, dishonoured and oppressed. This world is for us also. The `hassanah' for us in this world should not be less than in the next, even though the next is permanent. But we have to work for it. We are at the beginning of the Information Age, of globalisation. We are not too far behind. We can if we want to catch up now. If we wait they will be too far ahead and it will be too late again.

35. We are all good Muslims but it is too much to expect us to unite suddenly, to look upon each other as brothers, despite all our pious pronouncements on the brotherhood of Islam. But at least we can all learn to understand and fear the grave danger that we will face with a borderless world and to reduce the divisiveness between us, the divisiveness within and between our countries.

36. We can all learn the new sciences and technologies. While we must not ignore the teachings of our religion, must not fail to perform our personal rituals, but we must always remember that Islam enjoins upon us to seek knowledge, to prepare to defend ourselves, the `ummah' and the religion of Islam. Enough of us must be assigned to the acquisition of the necessary knowledge and skills of the Information Age so as to enable us to catch up with our detractors and enemies. Our people are not in any way inferior nor are we short in terms of numbers. It is only a question of planned redeployment of our human resources. In Malaysia today many of our most talented children are being deliberately kept away from acquiring modern knowledges because of the belief that only the study of religion will gain merit for the children, the parents and the do-gooders. They have apparently never heard of `fardu kifayah' and the worldly needs of the Muslim `ummah' .

37. It is going to be an uphill task. The opposition to the effort will come from Muslims themselves, Muslims who fear they will lose their influence and authority over the Muslim `ummah' if members of their community are more learned. There will be accusations that those who focus on modern knowledge are secular and unIslamic. Muslim countries will accuse each other of not being Islamic enough. And they will subvert and fight each other because of their differences.

38. Believe me, our detractors and enemies are not concerned as to how Muslim we are. To them we are all Muslims, their enemies and potential terrorists and they will do their very best to weaken us and in many instances to destroy us. It serves their cause to see us quibble over our Islamic credentials and they will encourage the divisions among us and within us. They will directly or indirectly support the violent extremists among us and the orthodox who reject the knowledge and skills with which to defend ourselves.

39. The solution is with us and between us. We can choose to carry on with our petty rivalries or we can together or even separately turn to face the real threat to Islam. It is well within our power and capability to promote and defend the cause of Islam and the `ummah' . If we chose not to, we shouldn' t blame others. We the Muslims are to blame. Allah has given us guidance in the Al-Quran and Hadith. Allah has sent his Prophet Muhamad s.a.w. to unite and set us on the right path. But it is we who chose to ignore the words of Allah.

40. I dare to hope that this meeting of Foreign Ministers of the OIC countries will recognise the danger and the challenges posed by globalisation, and recognising them, take the first step towards reducing the divisions between us and focusing our attention on the acquisition of knowledge to combat the use of Information Technology to destroy our values, our faith and the remains of our civilisation. May Allah Subhanahu wa Ta' ala in His infinite wisdom and mercy give us `taufik and hidayah' so that we no longer stray from His religion and destroy ourselves.

41. With that hope and prayer I declare open this momentous conference of the Foreign Ministers of the OIC countries.