

The Extraordinary Session Of The Islamic Conference Of Foreign Ministers On Terrorism

Palace Of The Golden Horses 1 April 2002

I am greatly honoured to be asked to speak at this very crucial Extraordinary Session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers on Terrorism.

2. Terrorism we all know has always been with us. It is not a new phenomenon. What is new is that newer and more diabolical ways have been used in order to kill and injure more people and achieve more spectacular damage.

3. But we have always been ambiguous, regarding terrorism in other countries as not really terrorism but as the legitimate struggles of people against their oppressive Governments or alien rule. As long as it happens to other people we do not believe we should do anything.

4. Certainly we do not feel a need for a universal effort to fight against terrorism.

5. But we know now that no country is safe, no one is safe.

6. We recognise now that terrorism is a crime, a heinous crime against humanity as a whole. It is a crime against the whole world no matter who or what or which country has been or is being targeted. The attack on September 11 we know, affects the whole world and damages not just buildings in a particular country and the people in them but it has struck at the very foundation of the world's economy and it has resulted in death and destruction for the country and people believed to be the base of the attacks. It has shattered the confidence of the world and has left an atmosphere of fear. The fallout from that terror attack is not over yet. Others will suffer, will lose their freedom, their rights and will lose their lives too. They will have to flee from their countries and live in misery in sub-human conditions.

7. Even the richest and most powerful countries, far removed from the scene of terror attacks will pay the price in other ways.

8. Perhaps the September 11 attacks are unusual in the extent of the fallout. But terrorist attacks in the past have also had an effect on the world. We may not have realised it but actually for years now we have been living in fear. That is why we accept the security measures taken by every country.

We know that even the innocent among us may be gunned down, or kidnapped and killed.

9. There was a time when air travel was so safe that nobody checks our luggage. Then came the first hijacking. Since then we have to undergo ever more stringent checks, ever more inconvenience. And yet we still feel fear, for despite the checks the aircrafts could still be used as guided missiles even. We will be more strict now, but we can never really be certain that the aircraft we are traveling in would not be exposed to newer acts of terror. We fly despite the inconvenience of security checks but we fly in fear.

10. Millions of us need to travel and whether we are in the air or on the ground we will always be exposed to terrorist attacks, to kidnapping, being held to ransom and killed even.

11. The world is inventing more and more new weapons for conventional war. Every country prepares for a frontal attack. And so the weapons race goes on, bleeding the nations involved, bleeding other nations as they are forced to acquire these weapons which they will never use for decades.

12. But all the while there will be some people, misguided perhaps, who watch the development of these weapons. These are the people who plan to make terrorist attacks. And there will be any number of greedy people willing to procure and sell the latest weaponry to the would be terrorists.

13. Today it is entirely possible for terrorists to acquire the weapons of mass destruction. A small vial of deadly bacteria, or virus is not too difficult to come by. Indeed it is possible now to acquire nuclear weapons even. Whether the world is aware of it or not we are being held to ransom. We pay a high price for protection but some day, despite all our precautions, our security arrangements, we may see these weapons being employed not by security forces but by terror groups or individuals.

14. And all this while the cost of defense against terrorism will mount inexorably, both in terms of money and our convenience and our life-style.

15. We must all fight against terrorists and terrorism for none of us are really safe. But we cannot fight an enemy we cannot identify.

16. Fighting terrorists is not like fighting another country. We can flatten the enemy country until nothing is left of that country. It is entirely possible to do that now, and it has been done. But we can still miss the terrorists, for we

do not know who they are and where they are. They may not be in the country we have destroyed. They may be elsewhere; they may even be in our own country.

17. Today people are mobile and there is no country that is ethnically pure. Migration takes place as travel becomes more easy and almost every country will become ever more multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-ethnic. Swearing allegiance guarantees nothing. There will always be aliens among us. We cannot keep track of all the aliens in all the countries. In fact we can never be certain that our own people might not be terrorists, or potential terrorists.

18. We cannot hunt down terrorists until we all agree who they are and we cooperate in the hunt. We have a need to agree on the way to identify the terrorist, to agree on what constitutes an act of terror. Discriminating against people who are ethnically or religiously similar to the terrorists only angers more people and perhaps contribute to the breeding of new terrorists. It is counter productive.

19. We already know that it is entirely possible for freedom fighters struggling against oppression to be mistaken for and to be deliberately labeled as terrorists by their oppressors. Thus Jomo Kenyatta, Robert Mugabe, Nelson Mandela, Sam Nujoma were all labeled as terrorists, were hunted and faced jail sentences if they were captured.

20. But we know that today they are accepted as respected leaders of their countries.

21. Clearly today's terrorists may be re-designated freedom fighters tomorrow and today's freedom fighters may become terrorists the next day depending on circumstances. If we hunt everyone whom some people refer to as terrorists we may be doing a great deal of injustice.

22. On the other hand misguided people and countries may harbour and support terrorists believing them to be fighting for a legitimate cause. In the liberal western countries there are quite a few terrorists' cells working in support of terrorist organisations in other countries. They are not too different from Afghanistan which provided a haven for the Al-Qaeda terrorists.

23. So how do we identify terrorists? How do we distinguish freedom fighters from terrorists, how do we determine which government should be condemned for acts of terrorism or harbouring terrorists?

24. War is about killing people. Why should it matter how people are killed? Yet today in war poison gas is outlawed by international convention. In the struggles waged by oppressed people, can there be weapons or forms of attacks, which should be proscribed by international convention? Can there be aggressive acts by those in authority, which should be condemned and punished?

25. Terrorists will not respect convention. So what good would conventions do in the fight against terrorists? Nothing at all. But it will put the onus on Governments everywhere to act against those who violate these conventions.

26. Before we can agree on the conventions we must decide what acts constitute acts of terror and who should be described as terrorists.

27. I would like to suggest here that armed attacks or other forms of attack against civilians must be regarded as acts of terror and the perpetrators regarded as terrorists. Whether the attackers are acting on their own or on the orders of their Governments, whether they are regulars or irregulars, if the attack is against civilians, then they must be considered as terrorists.

28. Groups or Governments, which support attacks on civilians, must be regarded as terrorists, irrespective of the justification of the operations carried out, irrespective of the nobility of the struggle.

29. However, if civilians are accidentally caught in the crossfire, the attackers should not be labeled as terrorists.

30. According to this definition of terrorism, the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, the human bomb attacks by Palestinians and the Tamil Tigers, the attacks against civilians by Israeli forces, the killings of Bosnian Muslims and others must be considered as acts of terror and the perpetrators must be condemned as terrorists. And anyone supporting them must be considered as terrorists. Where states are behind the acts of terrorism, the whole Government must stand condemned. But no race or religion should be condemned or discriminated against simply because people of the same race or their co-religionists have been involved in terrorist activities.

31. While we may be able to agree on what constitute acts of terrorism and who should be condemned as terrorists, it is important that there is international agreement on the condemnation of any particular incident or incidents as acts of terror by terrorists. Then the world community can

cooperate and participate in whatever action is to be taken against the perpetrators. Here there is no authority more competent than the United Nations to make these decisions. Once the UN has decided the whole world must cooperate fully in the fight against the terrorists concerned.

32. While we should identify terrorists everywhere and act in whatever way prescribed we must also find ways and means to prevent as much as possible the tendency of certain people or Governments to resort to terrorism. We must identify the causes of their bitterness and anger and we must remove these causes. I don't think people would want to blast themselves to death simply because they enjoy doing so. These are acts of the desperate, acts of people who see no way to redress their grievances, to alleviate their sufferings. We cannot just dismiss them as senseless perverts who enjoy terrorising people.

33. If we want to stop new acts of terrorism we will have to attend to the causes of the bitterness and anger and try to eliminate them. We must seriously try to do this.

34. Today we live in a glaringly inequitable world. While some countries and people are terribly rich and powerful other countries are terribly poor. Even within countries there is extreme disparity in the wealth of the rich and the poor. Today capitalism is supreme and there is no more option to defect to the Socialist or the Communist system. The rich of today do not even try to hide their avarice and acquisitiveness. In fact in the eyes of the helplessly poor the rich appear very oppressive, forcing them to accept systems, ideologies and values which they are not yet ready for. Worldwide there is a great deal of bitterness and anger among the deprived because of the resulting disparities between the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak. These factors can lead to acts of terror.

35. The world must address these injustices more seriously than just preaching the values of tolerance and understanding while ignoring the adverse results of these "virtues".

36. For the Muslims the grievances are real and truly unbearable, beyond mere understanding and tolerance. For the past five decades the Palestinians for example have not only had their lands confiscated but they had also been expelled from their own land by the Israelis. Their puny attempts to regain their territory through conventional war with the help of friendly states failed and they lost more land. In the occupied land the Palestinians were subjected to oppression and humiliation. Because they throw stone at the Israelis they are shot at and killed, children included. For the

Israelis it is not an eye for an eye; it is a life for being hit by a stone. They believe that by terrorising the terrorists they can stop the carnage. The suicide bombers consider themselves already dead and are on the way to heaven. They are not likely to be deterred by the threat of death. Killing their leader is not going to help either. More violent leaders will replace the fallen leader and the terror attacks will go on. The Holocaust did not defeat the Jews. A second Holocaust with Arabs for victims will not defeat the Arabs either. Israelis must come to their senses and opt for deescalation of terror rather than escalating it.

37. If the Israelis won't, then the world must forcibly stop them. If we are serious about stopping terrorists then we must stop both the Palestinians and the Israelis from mutual massacre.

38. In Bosnia-Herzegovina more than a 100,000 Muslims were massacred in full view of television viewers and for a long time nothing was done. The Muslims were actually prevented from acquiring weapons to defend themselves because this might result in more killings, i.e. the death of their enemies might add to the number of casualties. If only Muslims were killed and the Serbs saved then obviously the casualties would be less. We have seen that the world can put a stop to the killings of Muslims, but the world acted very late. Yet the Slovenes and the Croats could be protected and they were able to gain their independence without too much bloodshed.

39. Elsewhere Muslim countries are subjected to attacks and economic sanctions resulting in many deaths from deprivations of all kinds.

40. Because of all these there is a great deal of bitterness and anger among Muslims. The impotence of Muslim countries to do anything to remedy the situation adds to this frustration and anger. While the majority of them are resigned to their fate, a small number cannot help but feel a need to vent their anger in some way.

41. These people may be misguided. They may be wrong in believing they are fighting a jihad, a holy war. They may achieve nothing to put an end to their grievances. Indeed they may actually be doing a lot of harm to their cause, to their co-religionists, to Islam itself. But the fact remains that they are very angry and bitter and willing to commit terrible acts of terror, even if they lose their lives in the process.

42. The world must deal with these misguided people not just by hunting them down but also by removing the causes of their anger and frustration.

43. In Malaysia we had to deal with terrorists for 42 long years - from 1948 to 1990. We fought against them, we hunted them and we punished them. But we also looked into the causes of their insurrection. We found that they were mainly Chinese who felt alienated because they had not been given citizenship status by the British. Their insurrection was supported by the majority of ordinary Chinese who sympathized with them and who also felt just as alienated.

44. Accordingly the independent Malaysian Government gave more than a million citizenship to the Chinese, protected them, provided land for them, enabled them to go about their business, and gave them a meaningful participation in the government of the country. This was what the Malaysian Government refers to as winning the hearts and minds of the people. And the Chinese were won over. They slowly ceased helping the terrorists, stopped the recruitment of new members and they actually helped the Government apprehend many of them.

45. What the Government did may sound like appeasement. It may encourage people to resort to terrorism in order to achieve their objectives. But by removing their grievances and the causes of their violent anger, they had to admit that their struggle had become meaningless. Eventually they laid down arms. Today Malaysians of Chinese origin are peace loving and loyal to the country.

46. If Malaysia's experience is anything to go by, in the fight against terrorism world wide, the causes, the grievances of the terrorists must be attended to. We must win the hearts and minds of the people most likely to support or resort to terrorism.

47. The extreme disparity between rich and poor and poverty must be reduced, the rigid insistence that everyone must accept the same ideology and set of values must be relaxed and in the case of the Muslims, the oppression of the Palestinians and the other Muslims and their countries must be brought to an end.

48. But Muslims everywhere must condemn terrorism once it is clearly defined. Terrorising people is not the way of Islam. Certainly killing innocent people is not Islamic. Bitter and angry though we may be we must demonstrate to the world that Muslims are rational people when fighting for our rights and we do not resort to acts of terror. We must object strongly

to the linking of Muslims with terror just because a few Muslims have resorted to acts of terror. We must point out that Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews and others are equally guilty of terrorism. Terrorists must be identified by their acts, and nothing else. And we as responsible Muslims must contribute to the fight against terrorism by helping to define what constitutes terrorism and who are the terrorists. And when that is done we can all join in the fight against the terrorists, be they Muslims, or Christians, or Hindus, or Jews.

49. The September 11 attack on New York and Washington is an unmitigated disaster for Muslims all over the world. Our image, which had not been good, has been made worse. It does not help that we are all weak and disunited.

50. If the present crises in the Muslim world are to be overcome we have to be serious about handling it. You are here I believe because you recognize the danger facing us. Unless we are able to turn the present worldwide anger over the terrorists attack of September 11 into a real campaign against all terrorists irrespective of their religious faiths we are going to find that Muslim bashing will be heightened and our struggle to alleviate the sufferings of hundreds of millions of oppressed Muslims will fail.

51. We have a duty here to the Muslim ummah, to Islam and to Allah s.w.t Let us put aside other considerations and strive for consensus in our fight against the blight of blind anger and frustration and prove that Islam is indeed a way of life that will bring about the well-being and glory to the Muslims and to Mankind as whole.

52. I pray that you will have a successful conference and may Allah s.w.t guide you all. Amin.