

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Statement by H.E. Mr. Mohammed Haneef ATMAR
Minister of Education of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
at the 34th session of the General Conference of UNESCO
(18th October 2007, UNESCO House,)

Mr. President,
Mr. Chairman of the Executive Board,
Mr. Director-General,
Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply honoured to have the opportunity to address this august assembly today - in fact the honour really belongs to my country. I bring you greetings from the people of Afghanistan and very best wishes from my country's leadership for the success of the 34th General Conference of UNESCO.

Afghanistan is proud to be a fully participating member of UNESCO through our commitment to advancing human dignity, which is also UNESCO's core mission. Over the last six years we have strived to restore the dignity of the long-suffering Afghan people, by providing the means to peace and prosperity. This, however, would not have been

possible without the support of our partners in the international community.

We would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks to UNESCO, its Member States and every other nation and organization that has stood by Afghanistan and extended their gracious help in numerous ways to consolidate the gains we have made so far and to continue on our path of recovery.

Mr. President, may I join with others in warmly congratulating you on your unanimous election to this very important post, the duties of which, of course, extend well beyond this meeting. Your wisdom and vast experience of multilateral cooperation will prove to be invaluable assets to the success of your mission, and I would like to assure you of my delegation's full support.

May I also take this opportunity to thank His Excellency Ambassador Musa Bin Jaafar Bin Hassan of Oman for his leadership of the 33rd General Conference and outstanding contribution to the work of UNESCO.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, UNESCO's mission – of advancing universal peace and human dignity – is of particular significance to the people of my country today. After suffering decades of human indignity through the denial of their basic rights to life, education, health, food and shelter, Afghan women and men today are reclaiming their dignity by embracing democracy, by sending their children back to school in millions, by striving to preserve their national treasures and cultural heritage, by expressing their opinion through a free media and participating in a free market to further their economic development - fully in keeping with our long-cherished cultural and social values.

This people-led transformation has resulted in a new Constitution being promulgated; establishment of a national assembly, 34 provincial councils and nearly 17,000 community development councils through free and fair elections.

Six million children, 35% of whom are girls, are enrolled in schools today. Six years ago the oppressive Taliban regime had denied our girls their right to education. Afghanistan now has the highest school enrolment ever in our history. One hundred and sixty thousand teachers, 33 % of

who are females have been recruited and are being trained; over 9,000 schools have been established and a new curriculum for primary and secondary education has been developed.

Afghanistan now has the highest health coverage ever in our history and has resulted in saving approximately 40,000 children under the age of five every year.

Seven independent TV channels and scores of national and local radio stations are functioning freely to lend voice to our people; communications have been made easier through the ever widening networks of mobile phone technology; a peaceful reform and valuation process has led to a stable currency; several private banks have been established all over the country allowing our people to open personal accounts for the first time. The last six years have clearly demonstrated the resilience of the Afghan people.

Mr. President, Afghanistan is a nation at the beginning of a long journey towards lasting peace, stability and prosperity and it will not be an easy one. But it is a journey that we will persevere with, in spite of the

obstacles in our way. The people of Afghanistan are determined to maintain the course and it will be a journey made easier through the support of our friends and partners from the world community.

UNESCO has been and continues to be one such partner. On behalf of my Government, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to UNESCO, which under the leadership of Director-General Koichiro Matsuura, has played a significant role in helping the Afghan people to reclaim their basic rights to education and free speech, in helping to safeguard our cultural heritage through the reclamation, restoration and preservation of our national treasures for future generations. We are also thankful for the resources and technical expertise that UNESCO has provided to facilitate the revival of the free press and independent media based on universally accepted standards.

And my especial thanks as the Minister of Education for the unstinting support that is being given to us by UNESCO through the IIEP in the development, implementation and review of our National Education Strategic Plan - the first of its kind in our recent history.

When President Karzai visited UNESCO in March in 2002 a commitment was made to him, and I quote “*UNESCO in its entirety is with you and will remain with you*”. We commend you for making good on this commitment and we count on you to continue this partnership in the years to come as we face many daunting challenges head-on.

Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates, the consequences of the near-total destruction of the education system over three decades of war and under-investment are obviously noticeable in Afghanistan today. Education in its varied forms lies at the core of understanding among human beings, which is a prerequisite for liberty and peace.

Thus, the promotion of education has been given top priority by my government and is assured to all citizens free of cost. This intention is enshrined in our new Constitution and ensures that both girls and boys, the youth, older women and men, without discrimination of any kind, are given access to quality education. We are convinced that education is the cornerstone of nation-state building, that it is the means to democracy,

good governance and sustainable development leading to peace and prosperity in our country.

And it is exactly for this reason that terrorists and enemies of the State kill our teachers and students and attack our educational facilities. Violence against schools and school children is a more recent and desperate strategy adopted by our enemies to complement the misuse of *madrassas* where indoctrination of our youth to embrace violence has routinely taken place over the last decades. A modern, broad-based and Islamic education system, which we are striving to build, is key to ridding our society of the terrorist ideology that is still prevalent in parts of our country.

This terrorist ideology is leading to increased levels of insecurity in parts of our country and crippling the ability of communities and households to access basic needs and promote their social and economic growth. Although insecurity concerns only some parts of Afghanistan, its effects are felt nationally. Our second major challenge is opium production. The nexus between these two challenges is ever increasing

and calls for new solutions and strategies. We need to devise strategies that are appropriate to our cultural and social context and we need to do this jointly with our international partners.

Afghanistan is a fragile State in which peace and stability are still taking root. It is a country in which democracy is in its infancy, and where economic and social development is formative. To strengthen our determination and maintain our resolve to continue this journey we have embarked on, we need renewed commitment and long-term support from our international partners.

Mr. President, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan endorses UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy for 2008-09 and reaffirms strong support for the five program areas elaborated in documents 34 C/4 and C/5, the ultimate objectives of which are to ensure that education, science, culture, communication and information serve the establishment of peace and development.

Mr. President, let me conclude by assuring you that we continue to support the mission and objectives of UNESCO and are ready to participate in the governing bodies of the Organization. The people of Afghanistan are serious in their determination to attain peace and human dignity through democracy, tolerance, dialogue and knowledge-sharing and through these shared values we will remain an active member of this community of nation-states. Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you.

1