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Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance, follow-up and implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action

Written statement* submitted by the Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 January 2013]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Religious extremism: Threat to culture and peace in South Asia

Religion and culture play an important role in traditional societies. The traditional and moderate Islamic beliefs and practices with strong indigenous and Sufi content in South Asia are diametrically opposed to the radical Wahhabi and Taliban ideologies and practices which are intolerant of other cultures and groups. The jihadis do not agree with the modern concept of democracy and secularism. To a jihadi, Islam transcends geographical boundaries, ethnicities, creed, race and all other distinctions. The rhetoric of political Islam gained popularity due to its response to growing economic disparity and discontent, corruption, political failures, moral bankruptcy of modern and western material culture and value system. The challenge is further compounded by the booming Muslim population, growing number of devout, conservative and assertive Muslim middle class along with their rising socio-economic profile.

If one goes by the strict definition of the term 'Islamic fundamentalism', it stands for a return to the doctrines of Islam in their original form as were practised in the medieval times. It could also mean idealising the historical past of Islam and calling for a return to 'pure and original Islam', which can be achieved through peaceful, lawful, cultural and spiritual means. But in practice, the focus of religious radicals has been Islamisation of the state rather than reform of the individuals. In theory, jihad in Islam was meant to create an egalitarian social order where the poor and the deprived would be treated fairly and dignity. But what would have been a social, political or economic struggle against inequality, injustice and deprivation, has been turned into Qital (violence) by Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, Taliban and other Islamist militant groups which have been spearheading extremism and terrorism. The Taliban, Al Qaeda and other extremist terrorist groups like Jaish-e-Mohammad, Lashkar-e-Tayyeba, Hizbul Mujahideen, Jamaat-ut-Dawa (JuD), Harkat-ul-Jihad-ul-Islami (HuJI), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) etc. have been in the forefront of violence and terrorism in South Asia.

The extremists prop up the Islamic political consciousness by politicising already existing religious traditions and practices and by resisting change and modernisation. While propagating puritan life style and the meticulous observance of the prescribed code of conduct, the extremists lay stress on the enforcement of their injunctions at gun-point, censoring the veneration of ziarats (shrines) and sufis, closure of places of entertainment, exclusion of music and fine arts, strict observance of hadith or tradition, indoctrination of Muslim minds at all levels, making religion and politics essentially complementary to each other and negating the achievements of democracy, secularism and modernization. Islamic fundamentalists carry out indoctrination through propaganda, persuasion and even intimidation. Exhorting the Muslims to shun un-Islamic way of life, they call for removing what they call distortion of history. Alcoholism, dance, music, courts, judiciary, earning of bank interest and various things associated with a secular, democratic and liberal order, are publicly decried and declared un-Islamic. It is the ideological training, upbringing and brainwashing in the fanatical madrassas which moulds and shapes young receptive minds. The extremists and gun-wielding jihadis are produced in thousands of madrassas and terrorist training camps. History is distorted in various books. Textbooks and curricula are not only insensitive to religious diversity and communal harmony, but these even provide incitement to militancy and violence. To quote a prominent Pakistani scholar Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy, "the education imparted to Pakistani children is flawed and encourages extremism, intolerance and ignorance". Things considered as sinful include kites, guitar, satellite TV, carom board, chess, harmonium and wine.

In January 2009, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan issued an edict to close down all girls' school in Swat (a district of 1.7 million people in NWFP). With the result, an estimated 80,000 girls had their education cut off. Later on, 183 schools were blown up. Young boys are brainwashed by the Taliban to become their suicide bombers. To quote Murtaza Rizvi, Editor of Dawn, Karachi: "The Taliban have been beheading their opponents in public, destroying girls' schools and colleges, killing barbers who dare to offer a shaving service to men, imposing a dress code, systematically brutalizing women and burning down music shops." In July 2009, hundreds of musicians and singers fled Peshawar turning the centuries old musicians' market Dabgari Bazar desolate. During the past few years several popular singers and actresses – Yasmin Gul, Aiman Udas, Shabana, Ghazala Javed, were killed by the extremists for defying the fundamentalists' dictates and continuing with their music and acting careers. And the recent attack on Malala Yousafzai, a 14 years young activist vocal about the right to education of girls in Swat, who was shot in the head on her way from school in Mingora on 9 October 2012, by the Tehreek-e-Taliban, has shaken the world community. Malala has become an icon transcending from an individual to a movement. So much so the international community has declared 10th November as "Global Action Day for Malala Yousafzai".

Whereas the extremists burnt down several historical Muslim shrines in Kashmir few years ago, the Taliban bombed in early 2009, the famous shrine of 17th century Sufi Rehman Baba, the most widely read Pashto poet on both sides of the Durand Line. On 28 May 2010 two mosques belonging to the Ahmadi sect in Lahore were attacked killing 93 persons. At least 42 persons were killed in blasts at the popular Data Darbar shrine in Lahore on 2 July 2010. On 7 October 2010, two suicide bombers struck at the sufi shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi - the patron saint of Karachi on Thursday, when it was packed with thousands of devotees, killing at least 16 persons and wounding over 60 others. On 25 October 2010 shrine of Baba Farid Shakar Ganj, a 12th century Sufi saint in Punjab was bombed, killing 6 persons and injuring scores of others. Two powerful blasts ripped through the shrine of 13th century Sufi saint Ahmed Sultan, popularly known as Sakhi Sarwar in Dera Ghazi Khan district of Punjab province killing 41 persons on 3 April 2011, when thousands of devotees were attending the celebrations to mark the saint's anniversary. Needless to say, the jihadis by their barbaric acts of terror, bring into disrepute the religion they claim to profess.

The resurgent Taliban have been launching suicide bomb attacks resulting in large scale death and destruction. Umar Fidai, aged 14 years, a teenaged would-be-suicide bomber who was arrested on 3 April 2011 when he tried to blow himself up at a Sufi shrine in Punjab province of Pakistan, revealed that upto 350 suicide bombers including Arabs, Uzbeks and Tajiks were being trained in Taliban- run camps in North Waziristan. In June 2009, a teenage suicide bomber blew himself up in the premises of Jamia Naeemia mosque in Lahore killing Sarfaraz Naeemi, the leader of this mosque and injuring over hundred persons. Naeemi, a prominent religious scholar of Pakistan had earlier condemned suicide bombings as haram (un-Islamic). He alongwith some other clerics had issued a fatwa against suicide bombings, beheadings and other extremist acts of the Taliban. Similarly, a prominent Kashmiri cleric Maulana Shaukat Shah, head of the Jamiat Ahle Hadees, the Valley's influential religious group with about two million followers, was killed by a bomb blast outside his mosque on 9 April 2012. Shah had earlier issued fatwa against the stone pelters and their violence in the Valley.

Terrorism when blended with the fire and zeal of jihad becomes a deadly mix posing a major challenge to peace and security in South and Central Asia. The emergence of radical and violent religious movements poses serious challenge to secular and democratic polity, pluralistic social order, inter-religious harmony, security and territorial integrity of states in the region. It is high time that the academics, media, civic society, states and international community distinguish between the traditional Islam and the one propounded by the jihadis

and their mentors. The silent majority of traditional, moderate and liberal Muslims in South Asia, who practice Islam in accordance with the principles of tolerance and non-discrimination, need to shun their silence and assert and organise themselves against the extremists. On their part, the governments and secular societies need to help in preserving, restoring and emphasising the indigenous, traditional and diverse Islamic practices and institutions.

One would recall the constitution of UNESCO which states that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”. So the battle for peace is to be fought on the ideological plane. Modern, liberal, secular and scientific outlook needs to be imparted to the young generation through the medium of revised and restructured curricula, textbooks in schools and colleges, thereby replacing the existing ones which are replete with hate and gun culture. The madrassas need to be regulated, restructured and brought within the purview of new liberal educational structures. Once intolerance, hatred and discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, language, religion, national, ethnic or social origin is eliminated, peace will follow.
