

**Opening Speech Prof. P.H. Kooijmans, Minister of State, Chair of the Conference
Steering Group**

**Your Majesty, Excellencies, Your Holinesses, Your Eminencies, Distinguished
representatives of religious communities, Ladies and gentlemen,**

It is with great pleasure and satisfaction that I welcome you to this momentous ceremony. As far as I know this is the first time in history that representatives of the main religions of this world come together to “pronounce and confirm that their religions recognise and support the human rights and fundamental freedoms of every human person, alone or in community with others” and to adopt a statement in which they give expression to their faith in human rights. It is of historic importance that this ceremony takes place on the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On 10 December 1948 the representatives of the governments of this world formally stated that the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”. Now, sixty years later, in a period when religion is often seen – and regrettably also used - as a source of disunity and conflict, representatives of a wide variety of religions “come together in unity to stress that religion has been a primary source of inspiration for human rights “. And it is fitting that this coming together takes place at the compound of the Peace Palace which has become a symbol of justice and peace.

Allow me to summarize briefly the course of events which led to the present moment. On 2 november 2006 the City Council of The Hague, on the initiative of a Muslim and a Christian council member, unanimously adopted a resolution in which it took note of the fact that a number of international conflicts originated in or were aggravated by religious controversies; it further considered that a better perception and understanding of diverse cultural and religious convictions could prevent misapprehensions and conflict. It therefore invited the Burgomaster and Aldermen to take steps, together with the the Netherlands Government, that could lead to an inter-religious world conference to be convened in The Hague as international city of justice and peace. Two Dutch non-governmental organizations of a religious character were subsequently requested to organize such a conference. The initiative was endorsed by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Pretty soon it was decided to place the conference in the context of the commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights since the dignity of the human person and the indivisibility of mankind and equivalence of all members of the human race are its basic principles. Likewise, the dignity of the human person, his responsibility to respect the dignity of others and his accountability towards his Creator and his fellowmen in this regard are core concepts in all religions irrespective of their diversity.

A draft Statement in which the representatives of all main religions express their commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights was prepared by a group of experts and subsequently discussed by the representatives of world religious leaders. These discussions took place in a constructive and heartening atmosphere and a shared willingness to come to a positive result dominated the discussions. As one of the participants said: "This Statement may open new windows and create new possibilities for a fruitful and enriching dialogue". It is therefore a reason for deep satisfaction that the final draft was approved by the religious leaders in person and that they or their representatives are present here to sign the Statement. This Statement will be read to you in a few moments. Let me just say now that the leaders themselves at the end express the wish that it will initiate a wider process and will become a catalyst for transformation and change. This meeting is, therefore, not the end but the beginning of a process, just like the adoption of the Universal Declaration was the startingpoint of a worldwide awakening to the innate dignity of each and every human person. The role religious communities can play in this process of awakening and the enrichment they may obtain from it, is now explicitly recognized.

Religious convictions belong to the strongest there are. They can constitute a powerful inspiration for solidarity with the oppressed and for understanding of and respect for the convictions of others; in short, for the awareness that, in spite of all our differences, we belong together because we have the same origin and destiny. But, regrettably, they can also lead to exclusivism and intolerance and cause discord and animosity. Let us cherish the first modality and keep our distance from the second one. That is exactly what the present Statement stands for.

Your Majesty, your presence here today is evidence of your deep interest in matters of culture and religion and their relation to the observance of human rights. Your attendance at our meeting accentuates the singularly important character of this ceremony and of the Statement which will soon be signed.

I wish to thank the City of The Hague and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their continuing support.

And now it is my pleasure to give the floor to the Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Dr. Ibrahim Salama.