

Remarks of Special Envoy Rashad Hussain to the
Council of the OIC Foreign Ministers
Conakry, Guinea – December 10, 2013

Secretary General Ihsanoglu, Secretary-General-Elect Madani, Honorable Ministers, and Distinguished Delegates of the 40th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, I am honored to have the opportunity to participate in this historic event and am particularly pleased to be here in Guinea.

For the past 3 and a half years, I have been working as President Obama's Special Envoy to the Organization for Islamic Cooperation. My role is to work with the OIC and its member countries to deepen and expand the President's framework for engaging Muslim communities to build partnerships in areas of mutual interest and to address areas of tension and disagreement.

While much work remains, we are making steady progress on issues of mutual concern. We've ended the Iraq war and U.S., NATO, and non-NATO ISAF Forces are working with the Afghans to transition full security responsibility to the Afghan National Security Forces by the end of 2014. We are continuing to support democratic transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and in Libya, where we intervened with the international community to avert a massacre in 2011. We also

continue to work with the international community to build pressure on the regime of Bashar al-Assad to halt its merciless attacks on its own people and to make clear that he must step aside as part of the transition of power. We are committed to supporting the international community's efforts to destroy Syria's chemical weapons in the safest, most efficient means possible. Together with our close allies and partners, we have also taken an important first step towards a comprehensive solution that addresses our concerns with the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear program. And we will continue persistently the difficult work that we began in the first days of the Administration to seek a two-state solution between the Israelis and Palestinians, promoting comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

As we address these areas of political conflict, we also continue to build partnerships with Muslim communities around the world in areas of mutual interest and mutual respect. We do so because we believe that all people around the world have the same fundamental aspirations – to be able to live in dignity and peace, to support their families, to have access to education and health care. That's why we have implemented dozens of programs in areas such as education, entrepreneurship, health, and science and technology.

The United States-OIC relationship has prospered during the tenure of Secretary General Ihsanoglu, which is evidenced by the partnerships we have built in a number of important areas. For example, the United States and the OIC are working together on advancing our shared goal of a complete worldwide polio eradication. We also formed the U.S.-OIC Maternal-Newborn Health Task Force, which has made progress in several OIC countries. The U.S. and the OIC have also worked together through various programs such as “Partners for a New Beginning” to support projects leading to improved economic opportunity, education, academic exchange as well as science and technology. We are also partnering with the OIC to support women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. As the Secretary General mentioned, through the Istanbul Process we are working with the OIC on promoting state implementation of UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18, which breaks from the previous defamation of religions approach and promotes religious tolerance in a way that protects the freedoms of expression.

Related to this effort, we are also working to ensure that the rights of people of all faiths are protected, including religious minorities living in the Muslim world. Restrictions on places of worship, including churches and synagogues, and

discriminatory treatment are unacceptable. And as many scholars have recognized, such policies and practices are inconsistent with Islamic principles.

Over the past few years, the United States and the OIC have also collaborated on numerous political issues. The OIC was among the first to call for a No-Fly zone over Libya, helping to build the international consensus necessary for its success. We appreciated the work of the OIC in sending a representative to Afghanistan to coordinate the many assistance programs from OIC member states. The United States welcomed the OIC's suspension of Syria due to the serious human rights violations and the Syrian government's non-responsiveness to UN-Arab League efforts to resolve the crisis.

Recently the United States has been working with its partners at the UN, including many OIC countries, to address the dangerous situation in the Central African Republic. We are deeply disturbed by reports that over 300 individuals have been killed in Bangui in the past few days and that tens of thousands of Catholics and Muslims have been forced to seek shelter on church grounds and other locations in Bossangoa. We share your concern that the current violence in the CAR also threatens regional security.

To those countries that have contributed troops to the peace keeping effort, we recognize your commitment to restoring security to the CAR. We worked hard

with our partners on the UN Security Council to adopt resolution 2127 authorizing the multinational stabilization force and French support for MISCA under Chapter VII. We are confident that multinational force can restore security, prevent further atrocities, and take a proactive and forward-leaning approach to protect civilians and establish an environment that allows for the provision of humanitarian assistance.

In the broader realm of humanitarian assistance, in March 2012, OIC Secretary General Ihsanoglu signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which led to specific U.S.-OIC cooperation in responding to disasters, including cooperation on famine in the Horn of Africa as well as global partnerships to address other emerging crises in the Sahel, Syria, and Yemen.

There is, of course, still much work to be done. Muslim communities I meet with often discuss the challenges they are facing and what they are doing to overcome them. With over 1.6 billion Muslims all around the world, they see no shortage of human resources. With so many brilliant and successful pioneers, including young people, there is no shortage of talent. And with countries and communities that span across the globe, there is certainly no shortage of natural resources. What many have acknowledged is that we must continue to work

together to address long-term challenges, including access to education for all, secular and religious, and for both boys and girls. The absence of education breeds violent extremism and makes young people susceptible to exploitation by those seeking to advance their own agendas. It also inhibits development and is a major cause of many of the health challenges we face. Lack of access to education is also a key factor when sectarian tensions escalate. I remember as a young boy my father was sometimes asked if he was Sunni or Shia. He would always say “I am just a Muslim.” He did so in order to stress the importance of unity and peaceful relations within Islamic teachings. The violence perpetrated by violent extremists against innocent men, women, and children, often against fellow Muslims in sectarian violence, is based in ignorance and hatred. It is time to stop pretending that actions such as attacks on mosques after Friday prayers are rooted in or justified by policy grievances against outside countries. Rather than defending Islam to address such grievances, these terrorists actually violate Islam and hurt Muslims communities.

Our partnerships with the OIC demonstrate that we can work together to advance mutual interests. Seven million Muslims prospering in the US prove that our commonly held values can in fact be the foundation for working together to achieve our potential and advance prosperity. In the coming years, the United

States looks forward to continuing to expand the many U.S. partnerships with the OIC in order to promote and enhance cross cultural understanding and to help prevent extremism in all its forms.

On the same day that the world memorializes Nelson Mandela, let his life inspire our work as we continue to build partnerships to overcome even those challenges that some have deemed insurmountable. I again congratulate Guinea for hosting a successful Council of Foreign Ministers meeting, and applaud Professor Ihsanoglu for his visionary tenure as Secretary General of the OIC.