Statement by Ambassador Masood Khan, Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the UN, on behalf of the OIC on the Report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on Defamation of Religions
21 September 2007

Mr. President,

We thank the High Commissioner for her report on combating defamation of religions. The report is very brief, although it gives an overview and an account of the activities of human rights mechanisms and treaty monitoring bodies.

The report does not fully capture that defamation of religions, especially Islamophobia, is an alarming and growing phenomenon in several countries, threatening social harmony and integration in their societies. To state that it "continues to be a problem" sounds like an understatement. Frequent incidents of defamation of religions reported widely in the mainstream media and journals could have provided the data for a more detailed analysis. In some countries, more than 80% convictions of religiously aggravated offenses have involved attacks against Muslims. Surveillance of the Muslim communities has increased. Separate prisons are being set up for Muslims.

We believe that national laws and courts alone will not be able to deal with the rising tide of defamation and hatred against Muslims in the Western countries especially if such trends are spreading to the grass root communities. The report gives the impression that the status quo, with minor changes here and there, is the preferred course of action. We do not think that a quick fix will resolve the issues surrounding defamation of religions.

We agree with the observation that we need not establish hierarchies and prioritization among different forms of defamation and that we should promote tolerance and intercultural dialogue. We condemn anti-Semitism and Christianophobia. That said we will have to go from the universal to the specific, from the general to the particular, from defamation of religions to Islamophobia, so as to address the most pressing issues of combating incitement of hatred and discrimination against Muslims. Religious and racial profiling should come to an end. Terrorists are motivated by politics not religion. Therefore, it is imperative that terrorist-profiling by law enforcement agencies on the basis of ethnic and religious identities is discontinued.

We need to carefully examine the move in the Human Rights Committee to draft a revised general comment on Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Accommodation of Muslims and their religious aspirations in the Western world will create space for political and social harmony. All is not dark. Enlightened communities and opinion leaders in Europe and North America are trying to steer their societies in that direction. It is, however, surprising that in many instances Holocaust survivors, instead of promoting such harmony, are campaigning against Muslim symbols in the Western world. They should be the most ardent advocates against discrimination.

Islamophobia is also a crude form of Anti-Semitism. The Islamophobic objections to mosques and minarets in Europe tend to define identity on the basis of opposition to Islam and Muslims. We should strive for multiculturalism and coexistence. As Cathedral spires adorn the skylines in many Muslim countries, so could minarets in Western neighbourhoods where Muslims are permanent residents. Mosques in Europe with their traditional architecture should become a symbol of integration of Muslims into their adopted homelands. Relegating them to make-shift, underground car parks will fuel alienation and radicalization.

Publication of sacrilegious caricatures and sketches of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), as well as far right conservative campaigns against mosques and against the so called "Eurabia" and "Islamization of Europe" are sowing the seeds of discord. The philosophy underlying such campaigns should not allow to become "received wisdom".

We endorse the recommendation of all three reports that there is a need to start inter and intra religious dialogue at all levels. As indicated in the High Commissioner's report, we need the political will for such an engagement to counter this phenomenon.

The international community needs a framework to analyze national laws and understand their provisions. These provisions could then be compiled in a single, 'universal' document. The Office of the High Commissioner could disseminate it as 'guidelines for legislation – aimed at countering defamation of religions'. The OIC suggest that Council in conjunction with the Office of the High Commissioner should work to fill this judicial vacuum in regard to defamation of religions and religious intolerance. This will help in preparing the ground for drafting an international convention to combat defamation of religions.

We believe that in order to implement of the recommendations of Special Rapporteurs and various other reports, we also need a dedicated forum at the international level.

I thank you Mr. President.