



Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Community of Democracies

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STATEMENT AT THE INAUGURATION CEREMONY

BY

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REPUBLIC OF INDIA

H.E. Mr Jaime Gama, President of the Assembly of the Republic of Portugal,

H.E Mr Luis Amado, Foreign Minister of Portugal,

Honourable Ministers in the podium and in the hall,

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, especially our "matriarch" Secretary Madeline Albright,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

I would like to begin by congratulating our hosts, His Excellency the President of the Parliament and His Excellency the Foreign Minister and their staffs for the excellent arrangements made to host this major Ministerial meeting and for the warm hospitality of the Government of Portugal.

2. It is a particular pleasure to address this Inaugural Ceremony. India's is a culture which values modesty in conduct and speech, but one boast we have not been shy of making is that we are proud of being the world's largest democracy. It is India's conviction, from its experience in

maintaining this distinction, that democracy is the only form of governance that gives each citizen of a country a strong sense that her destiny and that of her nation is determined only with full respect for her own wishes.

3. India is also proud of being able to demonstrate, in a world riven by ethnic conflict and notions of clashing civilizations, that democracy is not only compatible with diversity, but preserves and protects it. No other country in the world, after all, embraces the extraordinary mixture of ethnic groups, the profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages, the varieties of topography and climate, the diversity of religions and cultural practices, and the range of levels of economic development that India does. Yet Indian democracy, rooted in the constitutional rule of law and free elections, has managed the processes of political change and economic transformation necessary to develop our country.

4. India is united not by a common ethnicity, language, or religion, but by the experience of a common history within a shared geographical space, reified in a liberal constitution and the repeated exercise of democratic self-governance in a pluralist polity. India's founding fathers wrote a constitution for this dream; we in India have given passports to their ideals. Instead of what is sometimes known as the "narcissism of minor differences," in India we celebrate the commonality of major differences. To stand the famous phrase on its head, India is a land of belonging rather than of blood.

5. So the idea of India is of one land embracing many. It is the idea that a nation may endure differences of caste, creed, colour, culture, conviction, cuisine, costume, and custom, and still rally around a democratic consensus. That consensus is about the simple principle that in a democracy you do not really need to agree all the time- except on the ground rules of how you will disagree. Indians are comfortable with the idea of multiple identities and multiple loyalties, all coming together in allegiance to a larger idea of India.

6. In my country, the largest electoral exercise in the history of humanity, the 15th General Election for our Parliament, was completed on May 16, 2009. It was a mammoth election, with over 460 million voters,

out of 734 million eligible to do so, casting their votes in 830,000 polling booths over a period of four weeks. Though as a victor myself, I can celebrate the results, I can say with great pride and satisfaction that the exercise itself, and not just the outcome, demonstrated the vital strength of democracy. As President Gama said today, democracy is also about how to lose, and that is something Indians have repeatedly learned, as multiple changes of governments have confirmed. Democracy is a process and not just an event; it is the product of the exchange of hopes and promises, commitments and compromises which underpins the sacred compact between governments and the governed that we are all here to uphold.

Mr. Chairman

7. As we approach the 10th Anniversary of the Community of Democracies, I must compliment member countries and the civil society organizations present for their abiding interest and commitment to the principles of our Community. Since the first meeting in Warsaw in 2000, our Community has grown in strength. The principles enshrined in the Warsaw declaration, the Seoul Plan of action, the Santiago commitment and the Bamako consensus are a reaffirmation of our democratic ideals and values.

Mr. Chairman

8. Several challenges have emerged or been reinforced in the last decade that have a bearing on democracy. I would like briefly to touch upon three of them.

9. The first challenge, also evoked by the foreign ministers of Mali and Brazil, is the international financial crisis and the danger that poses to the fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals, the MDGs.

10. Two reports were recently issued at the United Nations. The first was an Outcome Document of the high level General Assembly Summit on the Global Financial Crisis. The second was a report launched at the margins of the UN- ECOSOC high level segment meeting in Geneva earlier this month. Both have sharply underscored the serious negative impact of the financial crisis, also vividly described today by the foreign minister of the Republic of Korea. The second report indelibly and starkly brings out the clear signs of regression in regard to the MDGs as a result of the

global financial crisis. In 2009, it states that an estimated 90 million more people will be living in extreme poverty than was anticipated before the crisis. In fact, before the crisis the number of people living on less than \$ 1.25 a day was showing a downward trend.

11. In India we are conscious of the huge challenge of poverty alleviation and of the impact of the financial crisis. We have weathered the initial phase of the crisis ourselves due to our strong institutions. Our banks are well regulated, capitalized, and resourced. We have taken steps to maintain an adequate liquidity position while ensuring that delivery of credit remains on track. India's public spending has been enhanced significantly. These measures have helped India to maintain an estimated 7% rate of growth despite the current crisis.

12. But we are conscious that many other democracies could be vulnerable to the societal pressures arising from the economic setbacks caused by the global financial crisis. This is a time for solidarity amongst democracies, developed and developing.

13. Which leads us to our second challenge. Democratic governance is imperative not only at the national level but equally at the international level. We are a community of nations which believes and practices democratic governance at home. We are unified in these values. However, in the larger international arena, the governance relationship between developed and developing countries remains skewed. The global governance architecture has elements of non-inclusiveness and less than fully participatory institutions. Such a democracy deficit is visible in almost every multilateral institution, including in the United Nations. This is why India and other countries present here have called for urgent reform of the United Nations, including in the Security Council. Reform of the international financial architecture is also an immediate imperative. We hope that our common ideals of democratic inclusiveness and a level playing field will guide members of this community in supporting reform of the international governance system.

14. Third:

Terrorism is a serious threat to democracy. I need not dwell on this subject at this forum, since all of us know that terrorism and those who practice terror have scant respect for democratic values, norms,

institutions or governance. In fact, the very fabric of democracy is a target for the merchants of terror. Pluralism, diversity, human rights and freedoms are anathema to the agents of hatred and fanaticism. As a Community of Democracies we must stand boldly against terrorism and its perpetrators. Terrorism is, after all, an assault on the common bonds of humanity and civility that tie us all together. Our commitment to democracy should make us stronger in the face of terror and we should not relent till this scourge is extinguished effectively. A united and universal response is needed, which is why we should cooperate to adopt international agreements against terror, notably the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism which has been pending for the last eight years. On the broader issue of promoting understanding across Cultures, I am pleased to see President Jorge Sampaio here on behalf of the 'Alliance of Civilizations', a cause my government strongly supports.

Mr. Chairman

15. I have spoken of a few major challenges that face democracies today. What can and should be done to face them would be part of the debate in the three round table thematic sessions today. I look forward to hearing your ideas and approaches in addressing these and other challenges.

16. As we embark on our deliberations today, I would like to thank the current Chair, Portugal, for its leadership in the Community of Democracies, and to welcome Lithuania as the incoming Chair. Let me also take this opportunity to reaffirm India's commitment to work with our partners in the Community of Democracies. Let us cherish and value what we have in common as democracies, but let us also respect what makes us different from each other, and appreciate that it is in the nature of democracies to be responsive to the very different preoccupations of their own internal constituencies. The last century has, despite many horrors along the way, given us, in the famous phrase, a "world safe for democracy". Let us also work, in the 21st century, to establish a world safe for diversity.

Thank you.