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SPEECH

THE CELEBRATION OF INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR TOLERANCE 2017

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Yang Berhormat Tan Sri Datuk Seri Panglima Joseph Kurup, Minister in Prime Minister's Department,

Yang Berbahagia Prof. Dato' Sri Dr. Zaleha Kamarudin, Rector International Islamic University Malaysia,

Yang Berbahagia Datuk Heng Seai Kie, Advisor of National Unity and Integration Affairs,

Yang Berbahagia Datuk Baharin bin Idris, Director General of Department of National Unity and Integration,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon and Salam Perpaduan.

It is an honour and privilege to address you on this International Day for Tolerance – just six months after I've taken up office here in your wonderful country. What makes this country truly beautiful - in addition to its spectacular landscape, and undulating tropical rainforests – is its richness of cultures, ethnicities and religions. And I trust that when it's time for me to leave in three to four years' time, I will take with me, to my next duty station, the secret to your unity in diversity, and your strategy to ensure, for generations to come, "Respect, Safety and Dignity for All".

I congratulate the Honourable Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Joseph Kurup, the Department of National Unity and Integration under the Prime Minister's Department and the International Islamic University Malaysia for putting together this important event today morning, that helps to remind us how important tolerance, inclusivity, dignity and respect is, to lasting peace and security.

Principles of Tolerance

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Tolerance is a central concept in the Charter of the United Nations. The very purpose of the UN is “to save future generations from the scourge of conflict and war. To this end the Charter says that “we the peoples” reaffirm “faith in fundamental human rights” and “practise tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours”.

Based on this, in 1995, UNESCO pronounced the principles of tolerance¹:

- The meaning of tolerance: Respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human.
- That tolerance at the State level requires just and impartial laws, and that each person is provided with opportunities to economic and social opportunities without any discrimination.
- That tolerance is needed now, more than ever before, with increased globalisation, human mobility and urbanisation. And our response, and the shaping of attitudes has to be at the individual, family and community levels.
- That education - to address the cultural, social, economic, political and religious sources of intolerance - is the most effective means of prevention.
- And the need to promote tolerance and non-violence through programmes and institutions in the fields of education, science, culture and communication.

¹ http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13175&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

- It is therefore, fitting that today's celebration is held at a University – because academic institutes like yours play a key role in instilling mutual respect and understanding; and also, in peace-building.
- You are pivotal to shaping and transforming mindsets, and in promoting freedom of thought, openness and discourse, across beliefs and faiths. Shaping young minds with the correct values and principles, is critical to fostering mutual-understanding and for the prevention of conflict. As history has taught us, the risks of intolerance and exclusivity is too high a price to pay for any society or country.

Tolerance is also implicit in the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, which have been endorsed all 193 UN member states in 2015. Indeed, the ultimate aim of the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs is to ensure that no one is left behind; to work towards a world that is just, inclusive and equal. Throughout the SDGs, and particularly in Goal 16, we see that building peaceful and inclusive societies – is the bedrock of sustainable development.

Two months ago, Malaysia hosted the visit of the UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights, Ms Karima Bennoune. In her concluding statements, Ms Bennoune acknowledged Malaysia's good efforts in building a society inclusive of its broad cultural diversity. However, she also stressed the need for Malaysia to protect its tradition of tolerance. Malaysians can indeed be proud of the harmony and peace that is enjoyed across cultures and ethnicities. But as we can see elsewhere in the world, it is not something that can be taken for granted. All efforts must be made to safeguard this and by doing so, the remarkable development gains that have been made over the years will be protected.

In this regard, it is important to cast light upon and to address incidences of intolerance before they escalate. I commend the recent Statement of the Malay Rulers that served as a reminder of the importance of harmony and tolerance in a multicultural and multi-ethnic society like Malaysia. In this regard, the importance of inter-religious dialogue and open discourse to foster mutual understanding and tolerance, cannot be overemphasised.

Friends,

On this International Day of Tolerance, it would be remiss of me, not to mention the world's fastest developing refugee emergency and one the worst humanitarian nightmares to be witnessed in recent times – with more than 600,000 children, women and men fleeing their homes from the Rakhine state of Myanmar over a short period of time. Across the globe, where such forced displacement is happening, the root causes can often be attributed to the lack of tolerance and lack of inclusivity.

The UN has last year launched a new campaign called, “TOGETHER”, to promote tolerance, respect and dignity across the world. The purpose of this campaign is “to reduce negative perceptions and attitudes towards refugees and migrants, and to strengthen the social contract between host countries and communities, and refugees and migrants”. I congratulate the organisers for using this as the theme for today's celebration and I urge all Malaysians to support this campaign. It is an effort that is very relevant to Malaysia, as a recipient and host country to many refugees and migrants from across the region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For me personally, having worked in so many other countries with varied cultural and political contexts, I can see in your multi-ethnicity, so much social capital and the potential to move into an even higher state of unity and harmony.

We know that tolerance is 'harmony in difference' and where there is tolerance and inclusivity, there is peace, stability and sustainable development. This is the life that we all want for ourselves, and the future that we want for our children and for our children's children.

With those words, let me wish you all, a very Happy International Day for Tolerance.

Thank you.