



# **ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES**

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Commerce and Trade of St. Vincent and the Grenadines

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## **Statement**

By

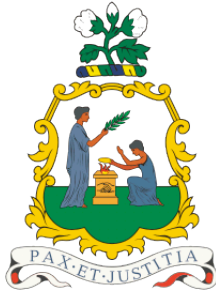
**H.E. The Honourable Sir Louis Straker**

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Commerce and Trade of St. Vincent and the Grenadines

Ministerial Meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement on Human Rights and Cultural Diversity

3-4 September, 2007

Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran



Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have the distinct honour and pleasure of addressing this historic and timely gathering of the Non-Aligned Movement on Human Rights and Cultural Diversity.

Excellencies, it is no exaggeration to say that the world's rich cultural diversity is under greater threat than ever before. Globalization has spawned a creeping cultural hegemony and homogeneity with a distinct western and mass consumption bias. Indigenous cultures the world over are being supplanted by a shallow consumer ethic driven by multinational corporations whose sole interest is to create a standardized population of global purchasers. The explosion in media and informational technology, for all its obvious benefits, has been an all-too-willing handmaiden to this cultural attrition. The homogenized, vapid and consumerist culture of the multinationals is exported worldwide, beamed directly to our computers, televisions, newspapers and cinema screens. It is devoid of context, yet rich in subtext. Its message, in a nutshell, is simple: "Our culture is better than yours."

Today we stand together in the Islamic Republic of Iran, seat of an ancient and glorious civilization spanning thousands of years. It is a nation with an unparalleled richness in religion, cuisine, language, literature, crafts and architecture. From Persian rugs to traditional teahouses to awe-inspiring mosques, the cultural contributions of this region to the richness of humanity cannot be overstated.

Yet, as we celebrate this magnificent culture and civilization, we know that it is under threat. Even here in the Middle East, western consumerism has gained a toehold in the consciousness of the youth. More ominously, Iranian citizens walk the streets of Tehran within range of foreign armies, whose historical mistrust of Iran is due in no small part to cultural ignorance and bias.

It is in that respect that we applaud the Iranian initiatives of recent years to seek dialogues among civilizations as a means of gaining cultural understandings and relaxing historical tensions. We in the Caribbean stand ready to assist in these civilization dialogues. For although our distinct and noble Caribbean civilization is far younger than those of the Middle East, we have solved spectacularly many of the intractable and vexing problems facing far older and larger civilizations. The debilitating issues of racial, religious and cultural intolerance that so muddy the waters within and between civilizations throughout the world have been largely solved in the Caribbean. As our Prime Minister is fond of saying, "our civilization, metaphorically, has emerged as containing the songs of the Caribs, Arawaks and Amerindians, the rhythm of Africa, the chords of Asia, the melody of Europe and the lyrics of the Caribbean itself."

In this the 200<sup>th</sup> year of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, we recognize the role that cultural bigotry has played in our own Caribbean history. It is a bigotry, fed by economic interests, that led to the conquest and settlement of our region, a genocidal extermination of the indigenous Calinago people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and the horrific exploitation of African slave labour. Today, a fundamental cultural bigotry lies just beneath the surface of conflicts in Iraq, Darfur, Kosovo and Palestine. It is a bigotry that we in St. Vincent and the Grenadines continue to decry, and we stand willing to join our brothers and sisters in the Non-Aligned Movement in combating this destructive intolerance.

The elimination of cultural bigotry extends to the fundamental basis of human equality. It is born of a celebration and respect for cultural diversity, not conversion and alteration. It feeds on constructive engagement, not combative enmity. Without this respect and appreciation of the equality of our diverse global cultures and civilizations, we shall fight a losing battle against the inequalities being foisted upon us by the evangelists of homogenous globalization.

Excellencies, while cultures can and must remain diverse, as glorious threads in the tapestry of our human existence, some human rights must be universal. Chief among them is the sovereign right to peaceful self-determination. The new religion of globalism cannot mean that it is heresy to forge uniquely local solutions to uniquely local problems. One size, or one solution, does not fit all, and our right to fashion our own solutions to issues of governance, education, energy and foreign policy – to name a few – cannot be impugned.

But make no mistake, our diverse approaches to disparate dilemmas cannot be an excuse for lapses in the field of human rights. Basic human rights are universal, and rise above the vagaries of cultural differences. Therefore, the multinational corporation that imposes globalization upon us cannot apply different standards of human rights at home in its corporate headquarters and in the far-flung sweatshops where its products are manufactured. But it also means that we within the Non-Aligned Movement must honestly and self-critically analyze our own individual failings in the human rights realm.

The Bible teaches us in the Book of Matthew that Jesus advised critics to first remove the plank from their own eyes before focusing on the speck in another's. If we resolve our own human rights issues at home, we in the Non-Aligned Movement will have far greater legitimacy and moral authority in championing this vital cause across the globe.

Excellencies, our Movement was born in the Cold War. But today's wars are regional, cultural, and sectarian. Our Movement must adapt to these modern challenges. In his speech to the Non-Aligned Conference in Cuba almost a year ago, then-UN Secretary General Kofi Annan urged that the voice of the South be heard on issues such as the genocide in Darfur, the conflict in Palestine, globalization, and issues related to international migration. All of those issues have a substantial cultural and human rights component.

We must begin the process of offering concrete solutions to these issues, to fashioning a more democratic and responsive United Nations, to making the Non-Aligned Movement a force for

change befitting its size and influence, and to stand as the proudest example of peoples of diverse histories and cultures standing together for the benefit and advancement of mankind.

As famously sung by the late Bob Marley, one of our region's greatest cultural ambassadors: "One Love! One heart! Lets get together and feel all right."

Thank you.