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Bahá'í International Community issues statement to the World Summit on Sustainable Development

NEW YORK, August 23, 2002 (Baha'i World News Service) – The Bahá'í International Community has issued a statement, entitled "Religion and Development at the Crossroads: Convergence or Divergence?" to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, a United Nations conference held in Johannesburg, South Africa, from August 26 to September 4, 2002. The full text of the statement follows:

Over the course of the 20th century, ethnic, racial and national prejudices have increasingly given way to the recognition that humankind is a single family and the earth its common homeland. The United Nations (UN), which was created in response to this dawning recognition, has worked tirelessly to bring about a world where all peoples and nations can live together in peace and harmony. To help bring about this world, the UN has crafted a remarkable framework of international institutions, processes, conventions and global action plans that have helped to prevent conflict and warfare, to protect human rights, to nurture equality between women and men, and to uplift the material conditions of countless individuals and communities.

Despite these significant achievements, the United Nations has yet to grasp fully both the constructive role that religion can play in creating a peaceful and prosperous global order, and the destructive impact that religious fanaticism can have on the stability and progress of the world. This lack of attention to religion can be clearly seen in the development realm, where the United Nations has, for the most part, viewed religious communities merely as channels for the delivery of goods and services, and as mechanisms to carry out development policies and programmes. Moreover, while the United Nations' human rights machinery has been used to condemn religious intolerance and persecution, UN development policies and programmes have hardly begun to address religious bigotry as a major obstacle to peace and wellbeing.

Religion as the Basis of Civilization and Progress

It is becoming increasingly clear that passage to the culminating stage in the millennia long process of the organization of the planet as one home for the entire human family cannot be accomplished in a spiritual vacuum. Religion, the Bahá'í Scriptures aver, "is the source of illumination, the cause of development and the animating impulse of all human advancement" and "has been the basis of all civilization and progress in the history of mankind." It is the source of meaning and hope for the vast majority of the planet's inhabitants, and it has a limitless power to inspire sacrifice, change and long-term commitment in its followers. It is, therefore, inconceivable that a peaceful and prosperous global society – a society which nourishes a spectacular diversity of cultures and nations – can be established and sustained without directly and substantively involving the world's great religions in its design and support.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that the power of religion has also been perverted to turn neighbour against neighbour. The Bahá'í Scriptures state that

"religion must be the source of fellowship, the cause of unity and the nearness of God to man. If it rouses hatred and strife, it is evident that absence of religion is preferable and

So long as religious animosities are allowed to destabilise the world, it will be impossible to foster a global pattern of sustainable development: the central goal of this Summit.

Religion and the United Nations: Working Together for Peace and Justice
Given the record of religious fanaticism, it is understandable that the United Nations has been hesitant to invite religion into its negotiations. However, the UN can no longer afford to ignore the immeasurable good that religions have done and continue to do in the world, or the salubrious, far-reaching contributions that they can make to the establishment of a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable global order. Indeed, the United Nations will only succeed in establishing such a global order to the extent that it taps into the power and vision of religion. To do so will require accepting religion not merely as a vehicle for the delivery and execution of development initiatives, but as an active partner in the conceptualisation, design, implementation and evaluation of global policies and programmes. The historically justified wall separating the United Nations and religions must fall to the imperatives of a world struggling toward unity and justice. The real onus, however, is on the religions themselves. Religious followers and, more important, religious leaders must show that they are worthy partners in the great mission of building a sustainable world civilization. To do so will require that religious leaders work conscientiously and untiringly to exorcise religious bigotry and superstition from within their faith traditions. It will necessitate that they embrace freedom of conscience for all people, including their own followers, and renounce claims to religious exclusivity and finality.

It should not be imagined that the acceptance of religion as a partner within the United Nations will be anything but gradual or that religious hostilities will be eliminated any time soon. But the desperate needs of the human family make further delay in addressing the role of religion unacceptable.

Religion and the United Nations: Possible Next Steps
For its part, the United Nations might begin the process of substantively involving religion in deliberations on humankind's future by hosting an initial gathering of religious leaders convoked, perhaps, by the Secretary- General. As a first priority, the leaders might call for a convention on freedom of religion and belief to be drafted and ratified, as expeditiously as possible, by the governments of the world, with the assistance of religious communities. Such an action by the world's religious leaders, which would signal their willingness to accept freedom of conscience for all peoples, would significantly reduce tensions in the world. The gathering might also discuss the foundation within the United Nations System of a permanent religious forum, patterned initially perhaps on the UN's recently founded Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The creation of this body would be an important initial step toward fully integrating religion into the UN's work of establishing a peaceful world order.

For their part, religious leaders will need to show that they are worthy of participation in such a forum. Only those religious leaders who make it clear to their followers that prejudice, bigotry and violence have no place in the life of a religious person should be invited to participate in the work of this body.

The Promised Reign of Peace and Justice
It is evident that the longer the United Nations delays the meaningful involvement of religion in its work, the longer humanity will suffer the ravages of injustice and disunity. It is equally clear that until the religions of the world renounce fanaticism and work wholeheartedly to eliminate it from within their own ranks, peace and prosperity will prove chimerical. Indeed, the responsibility for the plight of humanity rests, in large part, with the world's religious leaders. It is they who must raise their voices to end the hatred, exclusivity, oppression of conscience, violations of human rights, denial of equality, opposition to science, and glorification of materialism, violence and terrorism, which are perpetrated in the name of religious truth. Moreover, it is the followers of all religions who must transform their own lives and take up the mantle of sacrifice for and service to the

wellbeing of others, and thus contribute to the realization of the long-promised reign of peace and justice on earth.