

Statement by the Foreign Minister of Denmark, Dr. Per Stig Møller

22 February 2006



Let me begin by expressing my deep concern at the events that have followed the publication of the drawings in Danish and European media. As you know, the Danish newspaper has already offered its apology to all Muslims for the offence caused by the drawings. We have welcomed this apology. In Denmark there is a genuine respect for the religious feelings of other people and we acknowledge that many Muslims have felt gravely insulted by these controversial drawings.

The Danish Government is immensely concerned about these developments and their implications. We listen very carefully to the messages and reactions from abroad. We recognize that many sensible voices in the Muslim world, including the OIC, appeal to constructive and peaceful dialogue. And together with our partners in the European Union we reflect profoundly on how to solve these fundamental problems and prevent them from arising again. This will indeed be a long-term commitment on our side.

In the course of the next few months, we will launch a series of forward-looking initiatives aimed at promoting respectful dialogue. These initiatives, whether national, bilateral or multilateral, will echo many good pieces of advice that we have received from friends in the Muslim world.

As for the immediate future we are preparing an initial set of new measures. Just to mention a few: First, the Danish Government will provide a significant financial contribution to the Alliance of Civilizations, which is set up by the

UN. We are also considering ways of supporting, within this excellent framework, a conference on combating prejudice and misconception.

Second, the Government has taken the initiative to organize a festival in Copenhagen on the "Images of Islam". We are also planning an ambitious festival on the Middle East and Islamic culture. These initiatives aim at increasing our mutual understanding. We all need to learn more about each other.

Third, we will support a conference on religious and cultural dialogue. This conference will bring together the prominent Islamic preacher Amr Khaled, two Islamic scholars from the Arab world and three Danish experts. The audience will be young people from the Muslim world and Denmark. Last week Amr Khaled and forty Islamic scholars issued a statement on the importance of constructive and peaceful dialogue. I share and appreciate this positive message, and I am pleased that Amr Khaled will be able to practice such dialogue in Copenhagen in the near future.

Although we may disagree on some issues, including the significance of inherent values in European societies, there are undoubtedly more issues that bind us together than separate us. But we have to reflect on the lessons learnt from the past weeks and months. Last night on Danish television an outspoken Saudi critic of the drawings, eloquently explained that her recent stay in Copenhagen had made her realize how the freedom of speech is considered a fundamental principle in Denmark. Similarly, we in Denmark and Europe have become crucially aware of vital religious sensibilities in the Muslim world. The important thing now is to build bridges - not to burn them. In a globalized world, we all need each other – and we all have to work together. Denmark is determined to be at the forefront in this endeavour. Thank you for listening.