



**Statement of Professor Sarwar Danesh, Second Vice President of the Islamic Republic of
Afghanistan in the UNESCO's 39th Leaders' Forum**

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In the name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful

Mrs. General Director, Your Excellencies, Representatives of UNESCO state members, Ladies and Gentlemen; Hello to everyone!

At the beginning, I would like to sincerely thank the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization for holding this important conference and also thank Ms. Irina Bokova for her successful job as the General Director that had a lot of achievements in educational, scientific and cultural arenas

with the aim of development, stability, peace and security in the world. I would like to also congratulate Ms. Audrey Azoulay as the new General Director of UNESCO and wish her best of luck.

Afghanistan is honored to become the 52nd state member of the United Nation in 19th November 1946 after the 51 states who initially founded the UN, and since then, has well implemented its responsibilities towards its international commitments. Afghanistan is also honored to be among the first states that became a member of the important and valuable agency of UNESCO on 4th May 1948. My country has been one of the active members of this UN agency and it is a great honor and privilege for me to represent Afghanistan and be here with you at UNESCO's Leaders' Forum.

Afghanistan could also become a member of the UN's Human Rights Council during this year's General Assembly. This is a great honor and a sign of our country's high and respected status and also an indication of the world's trust in Afghanistan's commitment in human rights values. I sincerely thank the UN General Assembly and all the friendly countries that voted for our membership. We have had serious efforts towards securing human rights values during the last one and a half decade after collapse of Taliban regime in Afghanistan and had many achievements and progress in this area. However, after gaining membership of the UN Human Rights Council, we know that now we have greater responsibilities regarding our commitments and efforts towards provision of human rights values, including taking measures for achieving the main goals of UNESCO that are helping world's

peace and security and respect to justice, rule of law, human rights, and most importantly provision of the right to education and literacy.

Dear participants!

The Afghan nation, besides enjoying a rich cultural and scientific background, unfortunately inherited a bitter historical experience of conflicts, oppression, exclusivism, prejudice and inequality. However, we have now accepted a system based on democracy and will of the people. This system is the only solution to these problems and is the only appropriate context for achieving justice and equality. To achieve these goals, we have a progressive constitution that only its full and exact implementation can bring political stability for our society. Under such a system, during the last three years, considerable achievements have been made in different arenas including access to education, improvement of fundamental freedoms including freedom of speech and the right to access information, improved technology and communications, reconstruction of infrastructure, rule of law, provision of justice and human rights.

We do our best for implementation of our national and international commitments for reforms especially for countering corruption, strengthening good governance, judicial reforms, woman

empowerment, prevention of violence against women, provision of effective services to the citizens, strengthening accountability in all ranks of the government, appointments of high ranking officials based on merit and most importantly, achieving the 17 goals of sustainable development.

We have also been committed to the *Millennium Development Goals* and *Education for all* and the 4th goal of the sustainable development that is *ensuring inclusive and equal quality education and promotion of learning opportunities during lifetime for all* stands at the top of our priorities. We consider the *Ancheon Declaration* of May 2015 and *Education 2030* as a framework for our action and as our main blueprint for our educational policy and strategic plan.

Fortunately, during these years, the international community and most notably the United Nations and the UN Agencies and Afghanistan's partners including the United States of America, State members of the European Union, Japan, China, India, Australia, and the Islamic countries and our neighbors stood by us and supported programs of our government. I am thankful for all these cooperation and want to give a special tank to the US that has the biggest share of these assistances and also for President Trump's new strategy for South Asia in support of Afghanistan against terrorism.

Your Excellency the General Director! Ladies and Gentlemen!

Using this opportunity, I am interested in informing you about the challenges, commitments, and performance of the Afghan government in the areas related to UNESCO and refer to three main pillars:

Pillar A: Education

Afghanistan had shining history and civilization back in the history. Hundreds of famous and lasting names of philosophers, scientists, poets, and experts in culture and art in human history belong to a geographical area that today is called Afghanistan. But unfortunately, currently illiteracy is our big challenge besides other plights we are facing such as war, poverty, terrorism, unemployment and migration. However, a large portion of our current pains are due to some developments in the recent history that are imposed on us. With regards to its geo-political and geo-strategic location, Afghanistan, in its recent history, has been a victim of big games and goals of conflicted regional and global powers, and now is facing an imposed war by terrorism and radicalism. Fortunately, despite these problems, pains and hardships, the Afghan people's first ambition and efforts are to become literate and to gain knowledge for making positive change and progress.

At the time of collapse of Taliban regime, Afghanistan had less than one million boys going to 3,400 schools, where 20,700 teachers were teaching and no girl had the right of education. At that time, there was no national standard curriculum and text books. In literacy programs, only 22,000 male students received education through literacy courses and no woman could access such programs. Even a single female teacher was not available in all the schools. However, in the post-Taliban era, these statistics improved in an unprecedented manner. For example, in 2016, the number of students reached more than 9.2 million while 39% were female students, and more than 17,000 schools are being used by more than two hundred thousand teachers from which as a national average, 33% are female teachers.

In literacy area, in year 1395 of the Afghan calendar, 18,729 literacy courses were established to teach for 417,808 students that 55% of them were women. Form this number, 319,877 students could graduate.

Referring to literacy, I should mention that one of the important literacy programs that is managed by UNESCO and is funded by Japan, Sweden, and Finland is going to end in near future. Using this opportunity, I want to warmly thank these three countries and UNESCO, and strongly request UNESCO and our international partners to provide further funding for this programs for some more years until we can achieve an increased level of literacy as we have pledged in our international commitments.

The Afghan governments has undertaken many actions for literacy such as preparation and implementation of a plan for national mobilization for elimination of illiteracy, offering incentives for literacy in public offices, design of a plan for private sector engagement in implementation of literacy programs, signature of tens of Memorandum of Understandings for joint cooperation in better implementation of literacy programs between and among Ministries and independent offices, holding of Cabinet level committee meetings under chairmanship of the Second Vice President, and holding of numerous meetings at provincial, district, and village levels. The Government of National Unity is paying a very high attention to the issue of literacy and for this aim, the Afghan First Lady, Mrs. Rola Ghani, has been appointed as Literacy Ambassador, and President Ghani is also having a special attention to expansion and strengthening of literacy program.

Unfortunately, despite all that are mentioned, lately we have been receiving alarming news about the education sector and the number of children who are being deprived from attending schools. According to a Ministry of Education report, the number of children who are deprived from attending school is close to 3 million that most of them are girls. On the other hand, Afghanistan is ranked among countries that have the lowest literacy rates in the world. Literacy rate for men (15 years and above) is 62% and for women is 18%, while this percentage for low-revenue countries as an average is 70% and 57% accordingly. Only one from five women is literate in Afghanistan and literacy rate for women in rural areas is 3 times lower than literacy rate for women in urban areas.

In a report released three weeks ago by the Humans Rights Watch, provides that: number of girls who are deprived from education in Afghanistan has been increased in recent years, and attempts on obtaining required conditions for girls' education has been decreased. This report says besides insecurity, lack of lecture classes, lack of teachers and under-age marriages has prevented about 206 thousand girls from going to schools. This report points that deterioration of security situation and difficult environment has limited women participation in educational institutions.

Further to the mentioned causes, renovation and reform of educational structures and laws are also another essentials and the most important priorities of Afghan government. We are aware of the flaws in our old educational system and besides working to reform the educational structures, we try to change our approach to literacy and education. We now have modified and finalized the third educational strategic plan that will be used for the next five years (2017-2021). Moreover, revision of our curriculum and educational text books according to global standards and Afghanistan's international commitments is another necessity which has been included in the Afghan government's agenda. A special High Council on Human Resources is also established under chairmanship of H.E President Ghani to lead the education and higher education sectors.

Therefore, the Afghan government requests UNESCO to assist us in promoting literacy, educational curriculum revision, developing efficient policies, training educational curriculum specialists, female

teacher capacity building and providing education for vulnerable groups of society in provincial and central levels.

War and insecurity, widespread poverty, lack of buildings for more than 50% of schools, lack of professional teachers, lack of educational equipment and radical and anti-science views of some circles, are the most important challenges against education in Afghanistan. Despite Afghanistan government and the international society's persistent struggle against terrorism, war and insecurity still remains as the most important challenge in Afghanistan. We are facing terrorism and an undeclared war that has roots outside our borders where thousands of radical terrorists from all over the world along with narcotic mafia wage war against us with support of some of our regional governments. We are on the frontline of war against terrorism and defend all humanity from terrorism. In this regards, our expectation from the international community, our friendly countries and international organizations is to provide strong support to Afghanistan in its war against terrorism and force supporters of Taliban and the ISIS to stop supporting terrorism and come to negotiation and dialogue table. In that way, and by destroying the roots of terrorism, we can pave the way for an education for all that is equal, balanced and enduring.

Pillar B: Freedom of expression and Media

We witness rapid growth in press and media field in the last one and half decade. Whereas during Taliban rule, only one publication named “sharia” and only one radio named “radio Sharia” existed in all Afghanistan. Today, there are 366 radio channels, 203 TV channels, 72 newspapers, 354 weeklies, 344 magazines, 73 news agencies and 189 publishing companies are active, that altogether 2,455 media and institutions in various categories are registered and licensed in the country.

Growth of media needs a proper political atmosphere more than anything else. Experiment shows when there is an open and tolerant political system based on democracy, good conditions for strengthening of culture, thought and media activities is made available and when there is dictatorship and tyranny, light of media dies out. On the other hand, rights and freedom of people can be supported by freedom of expression and emergence of media is equal to emergence of civilization, civil society and the spirit of tolerance, endurance, strengthening of national and transnational ties among all ethnicities and social and cultural groups. Rapid and salient growth of media in last one and half decade in Afghanistan is mostly as a result of this factor. Afghanistan government is an accountable government and not only welcomes media critique reports, but also considers freedom of expression and free media as a mighty arm for provision of justice, rule of law and for protection of the country’s national interests. Therefore, we defend this human value and fundamental human right.

We have also taken serious measures in provision of access to information that is another human right derived from the right of freedom of expression. We have ratified the law of Access to Information and all public officials are obliged to provide access to information based on this law. An *Access to Information Commission* has been formed and also a *Joint Commission* to provide safety to media outlets and journalists have been formed between media representatives and government under chairmanship of Second Vice President, and specific centers for safety of journalist have been established in Kabul and provinces, and cases of violence against journalists are being prosecuted seriously by judicial institutions.

That is why terrorist groups are targeting freedom of expression and media, and threaten journalists more than others. Tens of journalists and affiliates to media outlets have been killed and injured, or have been threatened or intimidated. Terrorist groups proved that they are not bounded to any democratic value and freedom of speech and always have targeted media in their terrorist attacks.

Pillar C: Archeology and historical heritage

Our country that has more than five thousand years of cultural heritage witnessed numerous civilizations during different periods of human history. **A small but important part of Afghanistan's archaeological heritage is kept in the National Museum of Asian Arts here in Paris that I visited two days ago. There are pieces from 200 years before Christ up to the 8th century from different areas of Afghanistan such as: Bamyan, Shotorak of Kapisa, Fondokistan of Parwan, Bagram, Ghandahara region, and Jalalabad in this museum that are transferred from Afghanistan to Paris by the French Archeological Delegation in Afghanistan (DAFA). Using this opportunity, I want to sincerely thank the French Government and the DAFA for 95 years of archaeological activities in Afghanistan (since 1922).**

There are few countries in the world like Afghanistan with regards to its natural resources, cultural and social diversity, sub-cultural differences and coexistence of various ethnic groups. Afghanistan has a beautiful nature and interesting landscapes. It also has ancient historical locations and sites in many cities and each of them are reminders of different parts of this country's history. These include destructed Buda statues of Bamyan, Zuhaak city, Gholghola city and Chehel Borj in Bamyan, Herat Central Mosque, Herat historic fortress, minarets and tomb of Khawaja Abdullah Ansari in Herat,

Balahesaar, Sultan Mahmood tomb, Sanayee tomb in Ghazni, Kherqa-e-Mobaraka (sacred cloak of prophet Mohammad) and Baba garden in Kandahar, Ali Shrine in Mazar-e-Sharif and other historical remnants which exists in most of our provinces. Despite government's attempts to protect historical sites, they were unfortunately affected during years of war and violence and by natural and man-made incidents and in some cases they face a threat of destruction.

Some of our historical locations like Jam minaret and Bayman Budas have been registered in the list of UNESCO cultural heritages, but we expect Herat city, Kabul Babur garden, and Band-e-Amir of Bamyán to be registered in this list too and to receive more support in strengthening our archeology centers. We request UNESCO and international society to assist us in protecting our historical heritage such as Buda statues, Gholghola city, Bande Amir in Bamyán, Jam minaret in Ghor, Central Mosque in Herat, Mosalaye of Herat, Ekhtiaruddin fortress in Herat, Holy shrine and Mawlana Jalaluddin Balkhi abbey in Balkh. Today I want to thank Japan, Germany, Italy, France, China, Korea, UNESCO, Agha Khan Foundation and other international partners for organizing an event on reconstruction of the destroyed Bamyán Budas in Tokyo last month. Although Bamyán Budas were destroyed by Taliban, Bamyán was the only city in Central Asia and Middle East having four standards namely: historical value, antiquities, indigenous culture and handicrafts, and because of that was chosen as one of most creative cities of the world by UNESCO. This year (2017) a movie titled "My City Bamyán" has won the first award from among 54 movies from member countries of the world creative cities network invited to "Small World" movie festival by UNESCO. Also having Antiquities and Tourist attractions,

Bamyan was chosen as cultural capital of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 2015.

At the end, I want to emphasize that terrorists and radical groups that are enemy to education and freedom of expression, are also enemies of historical and archeological heritage. Destroying Budas of Bamyan by Taliban in 2001 and historical sites and remainders in Syria by the ISIS are unforgivable crimes that terrorist groups have committed. Let's lead a global cultural movement against terrorism by repairing destroyed historical sites and protection of other remaining heritage and strengthening of cultures of all nations. UNESCO should take the lead of this movement. We believe a World with UNESCO would be more beautiful and more bright. A world without UNESCO would be a dark and lightless world. In a world without education, science and culture, only terror, fear and violence would rule.

Thank you for your attention,