STATEMENT

TO THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

ON PEACE, JUSTICE AND SECULAR HUMANISM,

Dhaka, June 20, 2010

Dear Friends and Comrades who have come from all over the world,

To start, I wish to express my deep gratitude and enormous pleasure at being invited to address this international gathering. Undoubtedly, this Conference on secular humanism and on the trial of war criminals is of tremendous importance towards strengthening democracy and promoting your cause internationally. I am eager to speak on this Conference's main topic, the 1971 war crimes. I am equally eager to highlight the efforts which I have made along with others, to raise this grave issue towards European political institutions. But let me first devote some words to how I was attracted to work in support of the people of Bangladesh.

At the time when East Bengal went through a period of great political turmoil, in 1970 and 1971, I was a young student. I was inspired by the wave of emancipatory struggles against colonialism in which so many peoples of the global South, then termed the Third World, took part. Thus, I recall attending a World Youth Conference in The Hague just after my graduation in international law, in 1970. Here, officials of the Pakistani government were questioned for their government's gross negligence. Its failure to act in the wake of the devastating cyclone that killed an estimated half a million people in the South-East of Bangladesh, then East Pakistan. The next year, I happened to be studying in the US. I remember the agonies which my Bengali co-students went through, worrying about the fate of their families and beloved, after the Pakistani army had launched its atrocities against the civilian population. Having grown up with stories about the concentration camps and other barbarous crimes perpetrated by Germany's Nazi regime during World War Two, - I was deeply shocked. It is from this moment onwards that a long-term commitment to the cause of Bangladesh was born.

All of you who have gathered here are well aware of the crimes committed 39 years back. The carnage started right on the night of March 25th, when the Pak army, enraged by the determination of the Bengali people to achieve national self-determination, launched murderous attacks on student halls of Dhaka university, on slum areas and other neighborhoods of Dhaka. The carnage lasted til the very day when the Pak army was defeated and was forced to surrender. Hundreds of nationalist intellectuals were, as is well known, rounded up and brutally murdered by death squads of the *Al-Badre* on the very eve of liberation, in December of 1971. Within the short span of merely nine month so many civilians were butchered, villages burnt and women gang-raped, that it is surely correct to speak of genocidal policies. These genocidal policies notably targeted the minority Hindu population, but were by no means aimed at religious minorities alone. During every day of this dark period literally thousands of non-combatants

perished. And since the Western press was outspoken about these war crimes, there was a worldwide wave of sympathy for the cause of Bangladesh's liberation, and for the progressive ideology around which it was built.

It is a matter of shame that those who intimately collaborated with the Pakistani army and helped it implement its design, have been able to re-instate themselves in Bangladeshi politics. This occurred, let's recall it, during the period when Bangladesh was ruled by military dictators who were backed by, and were economically dependent on Western aid. Hence, Western powers cannot evade their share of responsibility for the given reversal, setback. Further, the facts on the identity of the collaborators have been researched and recorded so well by Bangladeshi intellectuals, that denials sound hollow. The Jamaat-e-Islami and other Muslim fundamentalist forces through their publicity not only supported the Pakistani army's war against the people, waged in the name of Islam. The party was also instrumental in forming paramilitary forces, the Razzakar Bahini, and death squads, the Al Badre and Al-Sams, which carried out numerous massacres. Let me draw on the reports brought out by the People's Enquiry Commission under the leadership of the poet Sufia Kamal, in 1994 and 1995. The reports focus on a total of 16 leading collaborators. Out of 8 persons investigated in the first round, five were leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami or its student wing, the Islami Chattro Sangha. Again, out of 8 persons scrutinized under the second investigation, 4 were Jamaatis or had led the Sangha in 1971. Moreover, almost all of them had become prominent leaders of the party after its re-establishment in Bangladeshi politics.

I will now move on to highlight the ideology of the *Jamaat e-Islami* in a nutshell. Some of you may have read about the recent bomb attack carried out on a mosque in Pakistan, in which a reported 95 people belonging to the Ahmadiyya minority lost their lives. In Bangladesh, Ahmadiyyas have become the target of a vicious campaign of religious intolerance too. This campaign gained special notoriety during the period when the BNP-*Jamaat* coalition government was in power, between October 2001 and October 2006. I have described the anti-Ahmadiyya violence in a human rights' reports distributed to European institutions and governments in 2005. In single attacks on Ahmadiyya mosques and Ahmadiyya communities, thousands of fanatical Muslims took part. Further, the campaign was primarily instigated by the *Khatme Nabuwat*, which officially did not form a part of the government and in name was independent from the *Jamaat-e-Islami*. Yet the leaders of the *Jamaat-e-Islami* openly and unreservedly supported the *Khatme Nabuwat's* key demands,- the demands that Ahmadiyya books be banned and that the whole community be declared non-Muslim. In fact, the very idea of an agitation against Ahmadiyyas was originally conceived by the founder of the *Jamaat-e-Islami*, Moududi, who in the 1950s sought to gain a foothold in Pakistani politics by targeting this Muslim minority.

Dear Friends and Comrades, it is not my intention to retell only saddening stories. Let me therefore devote some words also to Bangladesh's unique history of religious tolerance. I happen to be born in a country, the Netherlands, which for long prided itself on having sheltered pioneering philosophers of religious tolerance, thinkers like Spinoza and Bayle. Yet according to me, the history of religious tolerance of Bangladesh at this point in time appears more striking, and more enduring, than that of the Netherlands. There is a tendency in Europe to depict Islam as a religion which by nature cannot accommodate or co-exist with any other faith. But Bangladesh's history brings out the opposite. In the same epoch when much of the 'civilized' world of Western Europe was still engulfed in religious strife,

Bengal saw the flourishing side-by-side of mystical Islam, of mystical Hinduism and of other distinct religious currents, and that under the rule of Sultans. Further, Bengal's pre-colonial Islamic tradition in the literature is renowned for its syncretic flavor. The Sufi silsilas which undertook missionary activities in the region from the 14th century onwards, such as the Chishtis and Shattaris, were commonly inspired by the theory of 'The Unity of Being', *Wahdad ul-Wujud*, propagated by Islam's philosopher of tolerance, Ibn Arabi. And they did not hesitate to juxtapose Islam's prophets and Gods and Goddesses representing Bengal's pre-existing traditions, such as Vaishnavism and Yoga-Tantra.

Dear Friends, academic efforts are still underway to review the damage done by British colonialism to this tradition. Yet there is no doubt that the British thoroughly disrupted the structure of, largely tolerant, Islamic educational institutions that existed in Bengal until the 19th century. This happened primarily during the roughly twenty year period when the East India Company undertook the so called 'resumption proceedings'. Under Moghul rule, Muslim mosques and Hindu temples had both enjoyed the right of exemption from tax payment, 'inamdari'. Now, in a campaign which was decried by some of the most capable bureaucrats, - the British rulers with a chopper largely wiped out the educational tradition of the Sufi khanqahs, and undermined Bengal's political economy of religious tolerance. It is therefore all the more significant, that the spirit of toleration did re-emerge in the late colonial period and during the brief period when East Bengal was a part of Pakistan. I have of course in mind the life work of Bangladesh's national poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam, who via his artistic creations ardently strove to bridge the distance between people belonging to Hinduism and Islam, and who in his powerful poetry depicted deities and saintly figures belong to both faiths. I have also in mind the fact that the ideology of secularism was upheld by all the diverse political forces which participated in the war for the independence of Bangladesh.

Since there is very little time here to dwell on history, let me now return to contemporary politics. Here I want to share with you the good news that a political basis for support to the process of the trial of war criminals exists in Europe. Institutional memories tend to be short. But fact is that the European Parliament has *thrice* adopted resolutions that incorporated support for the demand that justice be done to the victims of the crimes committed in 1971. One resolution was adopted in 1994, when the people's movement led by Jahanara Imam was on. Here, the Parliament called on the then BNP government to refrain from repressive measures against the Nirmul Committee. It also upheld the Nirmul Committee's demand that Golam Azam and other representatives of Muslim fundamentalist organizations be tried for war crimes. In its comprehensive resolution of December, 2001, support for the demand was restated by the European Parliament, and then again when the EP passed its April 2005 resolution. I quote for clarity's sake the wording from this latter resolution: the parliament 're-iterates its support for the demand that those known to have participated in the massacres of Bangladeshi citizens and other war crimes' during the liberation war be brought to justice.

Dear Friends, it is my conviction that it is of strategic importance that Bangladesh's government gains the full support of the European Union for the planned trials. Hence, let me elaborate a bit on other initiatives which I have taken along with my organization to broaden our base of support for the issue. On one occasion, in 2005, a range of Dutch and German civil society organizations jointly petitioned Bangladesh's foreign donors. The petition argued that there existed organic links between the dramatic

deterioration in Bangladesh's human rights' record, - and the fact that war criminals belonging to the *Jamaat-e-Islami* had become Ministers in Bangladesh's government. Perhaps the most significant occasion when we tried to alert European institutions, was in January of 2008. At this time we advised the European Union's Commissioner of Foreign Affairs, Benita Ferrero Waldner, to take a clear-cut stance in favor of the withdrawal of the emergency. And then Shahriar Kabir and Sultana Kamal together with us staged a series of consultations on the issue of war crimes, with officials of the European Commission and with all the major political groupings represented in the European Parliament.

Dear Friends, let me end on a note of optimism. Given Europe's own history it is quite well possible to canvas and gain support towards the trial proceedings which the government of Bangladesh is going to initiate. Towards this end, we need to engage Bangladesh's diaspora in Europe; work to revive the public sympathy which has historically existed for the liberation strivings of Bangladesh's people, and make sure that each European government agrees to extend its political support to the process of the trials. And while there will be international attempts to derail the process, let's not hesitate to draw on the legal expertise that is available internationally. Let's all join efforts to make sure that justice to the victims of the 1971 genocide be done.

Once again my thanks to Shahriar Bhai, to Sabbir Bhai and to other organizers.

Thank you for your attention.

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