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ISLAM IN RUSSIA

by **Abdurashid Dudaev**

Abdurashid Dudaev is the president of the Foreign Relations Department of the Muslim Organizations in Russia located in Moscow. He was one of nine representatives of Muslim organizations from Russia to attend an international conference, "Dialogue of Christian-Muslim Collaboration" organized by the Inter-religious Federation for World Peace in Egham, England, May 29-June 1, 1995. This was Mr. Dudaev's speech at that conference.

I would like to send my heartfelt greetings to all the participants of our dialogue. We've gathered here together to know each other better, exchange our points of view and discuss ways and possibilities of enforcing mutual service for the sake of humankind as a global family of different nations. Many of you have already had some experience of cooperation in different forms on the current problems of creating peace in our modern society. Today's meeting as I believe touches upon one of the urgent and important problems of contemporary reality--cooperation of religions in peace-making.

Peace to all of you--I send you this Islamic greeting and I am grateful for the given opportunity to participate in such an honorable forum where all the reports, speeches, and discussions are to promote the principles of justice, goodness and well-being, searching for security, peace and harmony for the whole humankind, paying no attention to nationalities, languages, living area, and religions.

This is just a brief overview of a problem which is considered in my report.

Islam is numerically the second largest religion in Russia. There are 20 million of Muslims living in the northern part of Caucasus, in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, some areas in Povolzhye, and Siberia. The majority of Muslims in Russia are Sunis. They are under the spiritual guidance of a variety of independent regional religious centers that were listed above. Religious communities of Muslims have been promoting peace throughout history. That is the essence of our religion--a religion of peace. Muslim believers do not live as separate groups among communities of other religions. This fact has an obvious impact in mutual cooperation between different nationalities living together with Muslims. The content of their relationship, figuratively speaking, is coming to unity, solidarity,

cooperation, and mutual understanding. In this approach we follow the commandments of our prophet, the founder of Islam, who called for the unity of all people, friendship and brotherhood--prophet Muhammad (peace will be upon Him) taught us also that Muslims are to live among representatives of other religions, that the Muslim community (*umma*) is to be surrounded by other communities with different social orders and having different political, ideological and religious points of view. This was so many centuries ago, and this situation is still the same. We understand that for the normal life of society, for its fruitful development to guarantee the well-being of all the society members, we need peace because wars destroy people's lives and everything created by people; they bring only grief and decline of the society.

The prophet taught to treat with respect those who follow other religions. This fact witnesses that Islam throughout history has been advocating toleration and respect for other religions. Relationships among nations based on justice is the main criteria for peace on earth.

However relationships among religions were made more complicated by political forces that promoted intolerance, even hostility among them in different countries. Hostility, hatred, distrust--these are categories in human relations which allow certain political forces to keep terror, uncertainty, and suspicion among the followers of different religions. To belong to other religion is to become an enemy, but the reason for this is unclear to common people.

Unfortunately, we are frustrated in our expectations as we are entering the 21st century with a harmoniously developed civilization. Many areas on earth are devoured by the fires of war. Muslims and Christians are often in a military conflict with each other.

Nations of the former Soviet Union could not escape from this lot. Through several decades the whole chain of blood spread over different regions of the former USSR. Irresponsible politicians provoked conflicts in Baku, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Ingushetia, and finally in Chechnya. We believe that our task today is to analyze and evaluate current events. This point we can discuss separately. Most of all we are concerned with the fact that representatives of Christianity and Islam are involved in these conflicts.

Certain political forces of our country purposefully inspire and cultivate intolerance towards other religions and even encourage hostility among them. Mass media serving such politicians organized propagandistic support of this policy. Leaders in the sphere of culture and art made their investment in it also, presenting themselves as defenders of Christianity, suddenly starting to talk about the rebirth of Christian culture. In reality they encourage the tendency of hatred and intolerance towards followers of other religions. They even try to make the situation worse by constantly spreading lies that all the conflicts within the former USSR have religious hatred as the background so that Muslims will

constantly fight with each other. Sometimes these attempts are successful. For example, on January 21, 1993, the Council of Religious Leaders of Northern Osetia approved the decision made by government of that republic, that people of Osetian nationality (Christians) and of Ingush nationality (Muslims) can not live together. We should protest against politicians using religion for their selfish purposes. Instead of a dialogue and mutual understanding we may step on the path of mutual accusation and hostility making the situation worse. We should recognize the sad fact that religion is very often misused in the context of controversial questions and conflicts to enforce the process of separation between the Christians and Muslims. We should try to prevent that process.