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**AFRICAN INITIATIVE FOR EDUCATION FOR PEACE AND
DEVELOPMENT THROUGH MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN AND INTER-
RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE**
(Item Proposed by the Republic of Benin)

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I. BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION

1. The contemporary world is experiencing a highly disconcerting surge in religious extremism and Africa is no exception to the phenomenon. The current situation in West Africa which is extremely sensitive bears all the hallmarks of religious extremism and terrorism.
2. Whereas, the States of the sub region, with the exception of Nigeria and the Sahel countries, are not in the grips of immediate and direct terrorist threats, the fact remains that all West African countries do have a number of features that could render them increasingly vulnerable to the threat of terrorism which knows no borders.
3. Benin's geographical location and its proximity to a neighboring country affected by this scourge, a situation compounded by the porosity of its borders and its relatively weak capacities in terms of preparedness, intelligence and response, could make the country a zone of vulnerability.
4. One of the concerns haunting this country is the danger currently being experienced by Central African Republic, nationals of which can legally and freely move about and settle in Benin, a country in which certain Central African political leaders have made their home.
5. Religious extremism generally thrives on socio-economic and cultural terrain fraught with bad governance, social injustice, marginalization, ethnic, social and economic discrimination, etc., based on which religion is exploited as a weapon in the service of protest demonstrations and more political causes. This is the situation confronting the Federal Republic of Nigeria with the islamist group "Boko Haram" whose leader, Abubakar Shekau, abducted 250 high school girls in the north-east of the country in mid-April 2014.
6. Furthermore, recent developments which, at some point in time, culminated in the partition of Mali, deserve to be denounced, even though it is noteworthy, fortunately, that the country is taking strides to regain the path to national cohesion and national unity in the aftermath of the July 2013 elections. The security and institutional crisis that rocked the country in 2012, also had its origin in the actions of small groups, composed mainly of foreigners; their set goal being to undermine the foundations of Mali unity by challenging the secular character of the State against the will of the majority of Malians, and propagating in the country radical Islam rooted in sectarian and abusive interpretations of the Qur'an.
7. The place and role of religion in the public space are generally not simple, be it in the West or in Africa. Besides, our modern societies' relationship with religions, whether traditional or Book inspired on the one hand, and among their followers, on the other hand, is often complex.

8. Prejudices, resentments and misunderstandings abound on both sides. Yet, a close look at the issue shows that, beyond some *à priori*, there are bridges and points of convergence between the religions. This can be discovered only by opening spaces for dialogue and allowing the leaders and followers, in full respect for their individual identity, to talk to one another and thus know one other better, share their opinions, dispel misunderstandings, facilitate mutual understanding and cultivate the ethos of living together in the communities.

9. This is the meaning and scope of interreligious dialogue encouraged for centuries on end, by generations of political and religious leaders across the continents. **The goal of interreligious dialogue is to establish relations of trust and confidence between the faithful of the various religions to enable them to know and mutually enrich one another from their respective differences, and thereby better discover what is common to them and place same at the disposal of the society.**

10. 10. Beyond immediate and legitimate security driven response dictated by the fight against religious excesses, other forms of initiatives have to be adopted as a matter of urgency, geared instead to durable peace which can be achieved only through the systematization of sincere and methodical interreligious dialogue.

11. The African Education Initiative for Peace through interreligious dialogue, particularly Muslim-Christian, is in line with the foregoing perspective, given the resurgence of religious extremism in Africa.

12. This initiative derives its support from the rays of hope beamed by the symbolic meeting held in Rome on Sunday 8 June 2014 between the President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli President Shimon Peres, who accepted the invitation of Pope Francis for joint prayer with the Holy Father for peace.

II. OBJECTIVES

2.1. Global objective

13. Generally, the African Education Initiative for Peace through inter-religious dialogue is intended to help promote durable peace in Africa, by making a priority of interreligious dialogue, with Benin as support base.

14. This will involve establishing relations of trust and confidence among the faithful of different religions for "better knowledge and substantial enrichment" from the respective differences for concerted action, thus building more effectively together, a society of development and peace.

15. This initiative is inspired by the preamble to the Constitutive Act of UNESCO which states that "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed". It also comes in furtherance of two major events staged in Cotonou, namely: the International Symposium organized from 3 to 5 March 2014, chaired by Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the International Symposium on Dialogue among Endogenous Religions, Christianity and Islam, in the Service of the

Culture of Peace in Africa held under the auspices of UNESCO on 20 and 21 August 2007.

2.2. Specific objectives

16. The interreligious dialogue initiative aims to promote life experiences among Christians, Muslims and the faithful of other religions. More specifically, the initiative is intended to

- ✓ promote and accomplish joint actions among other religions persuasions;
- ✓ sensitize the youth of the Continent, region by region, to the stakes and challenges of living together through intercultural and interreligious dialogue;
- ✓ promote operational and consensual culture of secularism;
- ✓ undertake advocacy to strengthen the intercultural and interreligious dialogue component in peace operations led by the United Nations and other international or regional institutions.

III. STRATEGY

17. The strategy to achieve the foregoing objectives will be:

- a. promote joint initiatives between Christians, Muslims and members of other religious persuasions, on the basis of shared values;
- b. hold periodic awareness raising sessions for leaders of religious denominations to promote common values;
- c. organize advocacy actions for targets identified for strengthening or integration of intercultural and interreligious dialogue component in peace operations conducted under international mandate (UN, NATO, EU, AU, ECOWAS, etc).

IV. PLAYERS TO BE INVOLVED

- ✓ leaders of various faiths: priests, pastors, imams, preachers, and leaders of traditional cults;
- ✓ local, national and indeed sub-regional and regional political and administrative authorities;
- ✓ opinion leaders, civil society stakeholders and organizations;
- ✓ youth and women engaged in militant social action;
- ✓ faithful practitioners and other believers;

- ✓ laity open to inter-culturalism, etc.

V. ACTIVITIES TO BE CARRIED OUT

5.1. Launch of the Initiative

18. A high-level International Conference will be held in Cotonou from 26 to 29 May 2015, to launch the Initiative and identify the key elements of the project at the African level.

5.2. Institutional base and launch of the project at national level

19. The project, "African Education Initiative for Peace through Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue", makes Benin the hub for the development and promotion of an African initiative imbued with fresh hope in the face of the intransigence movements operating under the guise of religion being propagated all around the world. The Government of Benin is, for this reason, fully committed to, and takes an active part in, its implementation, by setting up a committee with responsibility to oversee the following activities:

- ✓ establishing the structures for implementation of the initiative;
- ✓ planning of the actions/activities, and designing of scenarios and themes;
- ✓ take-off of the project activities;
- ✓ organizing a series of public meetings;
- ✓ creation/establishment of consultation frameworks or brainstorming centers;
- ✓ Information-Education-Communication (IEC) activities.

VI. ACTIVITIES AT NATIONAL LEVEL

20. The activities to be undertaken at national level may be summarized as follows:

- ✓ hold public meetings in national and international languages in areas with high concentrations of various religions and where religious cohabitation could be problematic;
- ✓ put in place frameworks for periodic consultation among the religious leaders for the promotion of interfaith dialogue. It would be necessary in this regard to identify the values common to different religions and encourage the culture of dialogue whenever problems arise;
- ✓ create centers for brainstorming among the different religions' stakeholders to exchange views on common ideals and on universally shared human rights values;

- ✓ conduct awareness-raising sessions on national radio and television channels, especially faith-based religious channels;
- ✓ develop a publication and factsheets devoted to interfaith dialogue.

VII. ACTIVITIES AT REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

21. Interreligious dialogue initiatives of promise exist and continue to prosper everywhere else. What is now needed is to revisit them, incorporate them into this dynamic and adapt them to the context and realities of the African Continent. This component of the action will comprise essentially:

- ✓ organization of study tours in countries with enriching experience in matters of interreligious dialogue;
- ✓ creation of consultation frameworks to promote interreligious dialogue in Africa;
- ✓ yearly organization of an international meeting on specific topics related to interreligious dialogue;
- ✓ participation in international meetings on interfaith dialogue;
- ✓ creation of a website (English, French, Arabic and possibly Hausa Yoruba, Swahili, etc ..) as part of the promotion of interreligious dialogue;
- ✓ conducting actions at the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and other appropriate international fora.

VIII. DURATION AND IMPACT OF THE INITIATIVE

22. The initiative will, in the first instance, cover a period of three (3) years with the goal to initiate and help consolidate community life, social cohesion and sustainable peace in Africa, the only prerequisites for citizens' growth and comprehensive development.

IX. EXPECTED PARTICIPATION

23. Each partner is requested to support the Initiative's institutional base and participate, to the extent possible, in the aforementioned activities according to their preferences. The organization of experience sharing actions - study tours, public lectures, and promoting significant joint actions - will form the basis of unforgettable commitments. All measures and operations with multiplier effect and proven efficacy will always be prioritized and given preference.

X. BUDGET OF THE INITIATIVE

24. A call for contributions will be organized in connection with the financing of the Initiative. An annual budget will be prepared on the basis of contributions received.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Coordinator of the UN System in Benin and project partner, will manage the resources and present financial reports.

25. A budget of US\$392,600 US is envisaged for the Conference to launch the Initiative, including hospitality for international guests.

2015

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