Opening remarks by Ms. Esther Kuisch Laroche, Director and Representative of UNESCO’s Cluster Office in Tehran, on the occasion of International Day for Tolerance

16 November 2014

Excellencies,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear colleagues and friends,

I am very pleased and honored to welcome you here today to this celebration of UNESCO’s 70th anniversary and the International Day for Tolerance.

Creating a culture of peace and tolerance is at the heart of UNESCO’s missions and mandate.

On the day of its fiftieth anniversary, on the 16th of November 1995, UNESCO's Member States adopted a “Declaration of Principles on Tolerance” and declared the 16th of November the “International Day for Tolerance”.

Among other things, the Declaration affirmed that tolerance is neither indulgence nor indifference. It is respect and appreciation of the rich variety of our world’s cultures and our forms of expression. Tolerance recognizes the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of others.

This message is central to all of UNESCO’s action, guided by the conviction that lasting peace must be constructed in the minds of men and women, by nurturing the principles of tolerance and mutual respect through education, the dialogue among cultures, and intellectual cooperation.

In a globalizing world, it is no longer enough to live side by side, in passive
indifference -- tolerance requires active vigilance, renewed each day, against xenophobia, discrimination and hatred. We learn through tolerance to reconcile the universal rights that bind us together with the diversity that gives us so much, and to see that we need others, in all their diversity, so that we can be fully ourselves.

More than words, tolerance is behavior that is also learnt in the classroom. It takes the form of openness to the diversity of cultures and beliefs and respect for freedom of expression and opinion.

This year, we celebrate the 70th anniversary of UNESCO. It is an opportunity for us to rejoice and to recall what is essential about UNESCO, that which makes the message of UNESCO unique and in such demand today.

UNESCO is guided by a profound conviction in the power of ideas to change the world. UNESCO is also an organization that is based on values, on ethical principles, on the quest for human dignity, on respect for what makes us human beings.

This is why we have chosen today to pay tribute to Nelson Mandela, a giant of the 20th century and a man of universal significance, who embodied our faith in human dignity, our belief in the ability of every woman and every man to change society through tolerance and peace.

Nelson Mandela showed us that forgiveness is more powerful than revenge, and that respect is stronger than violence.

UNESCO is honored to have counted him among our Goodwill Ambassadors.

Nelson Mandela enriched the moral and cultural heritage of all humanity, and we are proud to safeguard some of the records of his legacy:

… the archives of the Rivonia Trial, for example, are part of UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register.
… we also have dozens of articles and interviews of Mandela for the UNESCO Courier, a magazine that he said helped him to get through hard times in prison.

…and Robben Island Prison, the place where Mandela served most of his 27 years of imprisonment, was inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List in 1999. Some people describe Robben Island as the “University of Life” since it is there that strategies for a future South Africa, based on tolerance, respect and non-racialism were nurtured by political prisoners incarcerated for their views and struggle against Apartheid.

Nelson Mandela showed us we must resist any temptation to respond to violence with more violence, because we can only build freedom and democracy through law, through reconciliation, forgiveness and justice.

And the valuable lessons that he has taught us are now more important than ever. Today, our societies and cities are ever more diverse - and intolerance is on the rise. Conflicts are aflame across the globe and one and half billion people now live in fragile or conflict-affected countries.

To counter discourses of hatred that seek to set cultures against each other, we must guarantee universal access to quality education to enable one to withstand calls to violence.

To counter the destruction of cultural diversity and the persecution of minorities, we must protect heritage as a force for mutual understanding.

To counter ignorance, we must guarantee freedom of expression. We must relentlessly combat racism, discrimination, extremism and the manipulation of cultural and religious identities.

The International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013-2022), led by UNESCO, is an opportunity for all of us to join efforts to build a genuine “culture of peace”.
On the 24th of September 2013, President Rouhani called for a “World against Violence and Extremism” during his speech at the 68th session of the UN General Assembly in New York. He said — and I quote:

“We should accept and be able to open a new horizon in which peace will prevail over war, tolerance over violence, progress over bloodletting, justice over discrimination, prosperity over poverty, and freedom over despotism. As beautifully said by Ferdowsi, the renowned Iranian epic poet:

Be relentless in striving for the cause of good. Bring the spring, you must. Banish the winter, you should.” [end of quote]

This International Day for Tolerance is a chance for all of us to deepen our commitment to dialogue and solidarity.

Tolerance can never be taken for granted. It is a way of living that we must constantly reinvent for new times, to recognize the riches of other cultures as the wealth of all to share.

UNESCO is committed to promoting tolerance through its educational and cultural programmes, through the “International Coalition of Cities against Racism” and through the mobilization of young people and global citizenship education.

In a world of uncertainty, in societies undergoing deep transformation, this has never been so important for lasting peace and sustainable development.

Let us therefore all try to carry-on the legacy of Nelson Mandela by spreading a culture of peace and tolerance around us in our day-to-day life.

I have been very privileged to live and work in South Africa, a country very dear to my heart, and to be able to witness myself the formation of the rainbow nation. I am therefore very pleased and honored to now invite His Excellency Mr. Whitehead, Ambassador of South Africa to the Islamic Republic of Iran, who will tell you a little bit more about the extraordinary role that Nelson Mandela has played in the history of his country.
Your Excellency, the floor is yours.