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联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the celebration
of the 800th Anniversary of the Birth
of Mawlana Jalal-ud-Din Balkhi-Rumi**

UNESCO, 6 September 2007

Distinguished Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour for me to inaugurate at UNESCO Headquarters the celebration of the 800th anniversary of the birth of the great mystic poet, Mawlana Jalal-ud-Din Balkhi-Rumi.

The activities that mark this commemoration – the international seminar, the performances and the exhibition devoted to the great poet – have been jointly organized by the Permanent Delegations of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey. I would like extend my sincere congratulations to these three delegations for combining their efforts on this occasion in the true spirit of international cooperation. I also express my warmest greetings to the Ministers representing these three Member States for this anniversary.

UNESCO is delighted to be associated with this tribute to an exceptional humanist whose teachings and enduring legacy resonate strongly with the ideals and values the Organization seeks to promote. In recognition of his universal message of tolerance, love and peaceful co-existence, UNESCO has issued a commemorative medal in his name this year.

This great poet's fundamental messages transcended linguistic, religious and geographical borders. Although he wrote his masterworks – the Masnavi and The Works of Shams of Tabriz - in Persian, he also composed verses in Arabic, Greek and Turkish. Primarily associated with Sufism, his teachings interweave components from diverse religions and traditions to form a unique and coherent system with a distinctive interfaith approach. His notion of “unity in diversity” is perhaps best expressed in his famous quote: “I go into the Muslim mosque and the Jewish synagogue and the Christian church and I see one altar.”

Living in an era of great violence and upheaval resulting from the Mongol invasion, Mawlana Jalal-ud-Din Balkhi-Rumi actively preached intercultural dialogue and understanding and invited his followers to open their hearts and minds to the “other”, even though this approach differed from the more traditional thinking of his time.

The poet's influence extends far beyond the borders of his home region. Today, his works have been translated into scores of languages. Translations of his poetry into English have attained sales of over half a million copies, and this thirteenth-century Islamic mystic is considered one of the most widely read poets in the United States today. Some of his most moving verses have been set to music by leading popular artists. In addition, an international network of researchers stretching from Central Asia to California is currently exploring the most diverse aspects of the great poet's life and oeuvre: from his ideas on the environment to his relations with his family, teachers and followers. Clearly, his powerful humanistic message, and particularly his belief that we are one interconnected human family, strike a vibrant chord with societies of the twenty-first century.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the current international climate marked by considerable intercultural and interreligious tension, today's celebration offers an excellent opportunity to bring a new global impetus to the great mystic's message of love, brotherhood, dialogue and respect for diversity. Like Mawlana Jalal-ud-Din Balkhi-Rumi, UNESCO believes that the quest for peace can come only through the knowledge and understanding of different faiths and the overriding qualities that are common to all religions. Otherwise, mistrust can give way to conflict and raise a wall of rejection between cultures. For this reason, UNESCO considers intercultural and

interreligious dialogue the most effective means of avoiding misunderstandings that reinforce negative stereotypes, fuel mistrust and pave the way for extremism and violence.

I firmly believe that all nations and peoples have much to learn from the teachings of Mawlana Jalal-ud-Din Balkhi-Rumi on the fundamental values of compassion and solidarity. Let us all follow his example and together aspire to spiritual enlightenment and contribute to the building of lasting peace in the hearts and minds of all men and women.

Once again, let me express my pleasure at the presence of our very distinguished guests and my gratitude to the Ambassadors and Permanent Delegations for their splendid work.

I thank for your attention and wish you all a very joyous and fruitful celebration.