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**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the first meeting of the Steering Committee of the
Permanent Forum of Arab-African Dialogue for Democracy and Human Rights**

UNESCO, 25 May 2009

Abdou Diouf, Chair of the Permanent Forum of Arab-African
Dialogue for Democracy and Human Rights,

Boutros Boutros-Ghali, President of the National Council
for Human Rights of Egypt,

Ambassador Sylvie Fadlallah, Chairperson of the Arab Group at UNESCO,

Ambassador Andrew Mulenga, representative of the Chairperson
of the Africa Group at UNESCO,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to inaugurate this morning the first meeting of the Steering Committee of the Permanent Forum of Arab-African Dialogue for Democracy and Human Rights.

Allow me at this point to extend warm greetings to President Abdou Diouf, who has agreed to chair the Permanent Forum, and to the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who will be its Vice-Chair.

I also wish to welcome the 15 representatives of national, regional and international organizations who will sit on the Steering Committee of the Permanent Forum.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you are aware, the National Council for Human Rights of Egypt, presided over by Mr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, has organized since 2005, with UNESCO's support, a series of international conferences on democracy and human rights in Africa and in the Arab region.

The idea of establishing this Forum thus emerged at the end of the third international conference, held in Cairo in December 2008, which dealt with the theme of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 60 years on: between rhetoric and reality.

This initiative responded to the feeling that there was a need for forums for dialogue and reflection on the issue of human rights between governments, parliamentarians, civil society, regional organizations, and the specialized agencies of the United Nations.

As we have just celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this project geared to the Africa and Middle East regions is therefore especially timely.

In particular, it could provide a forum for exchanges useful to many actors committed to these questions, for sharing experiences and best practices, and evaluating the possibilities offered by the standard-setting instruments adopted in the two regions, such as the African Charter on Democracy and the Arab Charter on Human Rights.

This then is the Forum's mission: to provide a space for ongoing dialogue not only between the two regions, but also between the various institutions involved in implementing policies and strategies relating to human rights.

To make a success of such a forum, it was advisable to secure a great multiplicity of views and opinions. Therefore I cannot but applaud the richness and diversity of the organizations serving on the Forum's Steering Committee, represented in particular by the International Organization of the Francophonie, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the League of Arab States, the African Union, the Pan-African Parliament, the Arab Parliament and national human rights commissions of African and Middle Eastern countries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We know that Africa and the Arab world share common priorities and challenges.

The issue of human rights, naturally, is an entry point for reflection on questions as different and central as development, cultural diversity, social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, gender equality, freedom of the press and education.

Promoting regional approaches, with due regard for the universal and indivisible principles of human rights, is part of this context.

I am sure that the Steering Committee will be able to determine policy lines and forms of action responding to these various challenges and thus help the Forum to devise practical plans of action in order to promote more fully the universality of social, economic and political rights in both regions.

I am also sure that the Committee will give a prominent place to the advancement of women, one of the priorities of the Millennium Development Goals. In this respect, I hope that UNESCO's Priority Gender Equality Action Plan (2008-2013), submitted to the Executive Board in March 2008, will be a source of inspiration for your work.

In conclusion, allow me to sincerely thank once again Mr Abdou Diouf for his personal involvement in the Forum's proceedings and Mr Boutros Boutros-Ghali for his tireless efforts to promote human rights throughout the world.

In helping to define the purpose, objectives and functioning of this Permanent Forum, which will meet for the first time in December 2009 in Cairo, the Steering Committee will play a very important preparatory role.

I therefore wish you every success in your deliberations and thank you for your attention.