

STATEMENT BY H.E. MR. KAMALESH SARMA Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations On Agenda Item 46: The situation in Afghanistan and its implication for International peace and security at the General Assembly on March 9, 2001

Mr. President,

We are grateful to you for arranging this meeting so expeditiously, and to the German delegation, led by Ambassador Kastrup, for taking the initiative to prepare the draft resolution and mobilising support for it in such a short time.

We meet to discuss actions which, in the 21st century, should have been unthinkable. Afghanistan has through history stood at the cross-roads of civilisations and it bears their imprint in great measure across its length and breadth. The relics of these civilizations, including the towering Bamiyan Buddhas, stand witness to the pride of the Afghan people in their tradition. The Taliban edict constitutes an assault not only on Afghan tradition but on the common heritage of mankind and the very idea of civilized living. It once again profiles the Taliban's bigoted and obscurantist ideologies and recalls its earlier decrees such as the 1998 decree which required a minority in Afghan society to wear a distinctive piece of clothing or put a distinctive mark on their bodies so that they could be easily distinguished. It also demonstrates, yet again, that destruction is the Taliban's only creed: it has destroyed ethnic harmony in Afghanistan; it has strangled the desire of Afghan girls and women for education; it has pulverised the homes and means of livelihood of a large number of its people; and it has ruthlessly trampled upon the human rights of Afghans.

Mr. President,

In the face of universal outrage and despite protests and appeals against taking such a step, the Taliban is launched upon committing a grievous misdeed, indeed, a sacrilege to humanity, to the civilisational and cultural inheritance of all mankind, by starting to destroy the incomparable and unique statues of Buddha at Bamiyan, celebrated over almost two millennia. It is indeed deeply tragic and a cause for anguish that this act of cultural vandalism, the most extreme amongst the many other acts of destruction of statues, artefacts and archaeological treasures of Afghanistan, is being perpetrated despite a universal outcry against it. That it is being perversely undertaken in the name of a noble religion makes it even more reprehensible.

The intent to destroy the Bamiyan Buddha should be seen not as an impulsive act but in keeping with a policy of cultural nihilism which seeks to erase its cultural past from Afghanistan, that cross-roads of Asian history and palimpsest of succeeding civilizations. It is to create a nullity of one of the most written upon pages in world history, a destruction of the patrimony of a whole people, an act before our eyes in the 21st century such as those we thought we had forever left behind. A refugee resident from Kabul has been quoted as observing, "We have lost everything, our economic system and our political system. The only thing we had left was our history. It is like destroying our only hope as Afghans". This latest unspeakable affront to our idea of Civilization, on which we seek to stimulate a Dialogue within this House, is part of the effort to wipe out the civilisational memory of a people. Ai

Khanoum, the 2nd to 4th century BC Greek city in the northern province of Takhar, a relic of the days of Alexander the Great, has been systematically plundered. At the country's most famous site — Hadda, near Jalalabad, a 2nd to 7th century stupa and monastery complex renowned for its Graeco-Roman sculpture - every statue has been looted. The Kabul Museum, which reflected in its collection, cultural influences from a number of sources rarely matched in history - Persian, Mongol, Chinese, Greek, Roman and even Mesopotamian civilizations and unique in terms of enlightenment of the art of its period, stands plundered, despoiled and bereft. The Museum contained the ivories of Begram, the stucco of Hadda, painted clay figures from Bamiyan, bronzes and marble from the Ghaznavid, works in wood from Nuristan, ancient Greek coins, glazed pottery of Hellenistic technique and Indian design, masks of gold repousse, and bronzes of Greek horsemen. Among the losses from the museum is the throne that was a centerpiece of the Begram Ivories; pieces of it are scattered and it has ceased to exist. What we are seeing before our eyes is the annihilation of everything that is uniquely Afghan - its extraordinary diversity.

Mr. President,

This regression into mindless medieval barbarism in Afghanistan under the Taliban is precisely what India, amongst many other countries, has been cautioning the world against for so long. The international community has unequivocally condemned and rejected the Taliban's ideological orientations which have been responsible for the Taliban territories emerging as the world's principal centre of international terrorism, illicit drugs and violation of human rights, especially those of women.

The destruction of the giant statutes of the Buddha, the embodiment of compassion, enlightenment and peace, is the symptom of a much greater threat and challenge. In emulating infamous regimes that destroyed every vestige of received value, experience and meaning, the Taliban is bent on policies that will result in the annihilation of the rich mosaic of cultures that is Afghanistan. An observer of this carnage has said, " The damage is not just physical and material; the soul and spiritual well-being of Afghans has been under constant attack".

Mr. President,

Even at this late stage, we would like to appeal that the destruction of the incomparable manifestations of the shared cultural heritage of mankind must stop. If the Taliban do not wish to retain this inheritance, our government has announced that we would be happy to arrange for the transfer of all these artefacts to India where they would be kept safely and preserved for all mankind, in the full knowledge and clear understanding that they are, in the first place and above all, treasures of the Afghan people themselves.

Mr. President,

In the face of this utter disregard of the Taliban for Afghanistan's precious and irreplaceable heritage, which is one of the high points in the cultural history of our region, and its disdain for the international protests and appeals over the destruction in this year of a Dialogue among Civilisations, of artefacts that are not only magnificent creations of an ancient

civilization, but objects of reverence for Buddhists world-wide, the international community's collective message today must be one of unequivocal, strong and clear condemnation and for the immediate cessation of this act of destruction.