

MUSLIM AID
Annual Iftar Party with orphans and street children from Dhaka
Dhaka, 22nd August 2010

Chief Guest Address by Ambassador Dr. Stefan Frowein, Head of Delegation, Delegation of the European Union to Bangladesh

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'm delighted to be here at Muslim Aid's annual iftar party and first of all I would like to congratulate your organisation for 25 years of "Serving Humanity". And as "Serving Humanity" is your organisation's motto, let me quote right at the beginning Phillips Brooks¹ who said: "Those who help a child help humanity with an immediateness which no other help given to human creature in any other stage of human life can possibly give again". 25 years you have worked on a vision that is as relevant today as it was all those years ago: the alleviation of poverty, education for all, and the provision of basic amenities for those in need, in order to create a world where charity and compassion produce justice, self reliance and human development. Muslim Aid started from humble beginnings in 1985, running from just a small office in London with a handful of staff and volunteers. If today Muslim Aid stands tall, it is because of the bricks that lie hidden in its foundation - the scores of dedicated staff and volunteers whose skills and service make Muslim Aid a catalyst for change in the lives of millions of people. I can only thank all these 'unknown heroes' for their daily dedication and I am proud that this worldwide success story originated in the European Union!

We are celebrating today an iftar party and it is the teachings of Islam that have guided Muslim Aid from the beginning. Islam, like all religions, believes strongly in a duty to be charitable, to help others, that wealth is held by human beings in trust. What this means is that the rich and affluent have a duty to help the less fortunate and this duty unites us Christians and Muslims for it is Luke 12:48 who teaches us that *"Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required"*. Faith and charity have always shared a close relationship. From the givings of the churches to the multi faith based charities that exist today.

Ladies and Gentlemen, there are an estimated 140 million of orphans in the world – orphan children who lost their families due to wars, occupations, epidemics, natural disasters or poverty. Children who have been turned into staggering statistics, huge numbers that we throw around in our speeches – like I

¹ Phillips Brooks (December 13, 1835 – January 23, 1893) was an American clergyman and author, who briefly served as Bishop of Massachusetts in the Episcopal Church during the early 1890s

do today. And because the statistics are so big, just like a hurricane or a tsunami, or an earthquake, they can actually disempower us as we are overcome by a sense of helplessness. How can we ever hope to deal with such a situation? Where do we start? How can we find the resources?

Well, to use the famous words of Mother Teresa: "If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one." Besides, children will not remember you for the material things you provided, but for the feeling that you cherished them. Each child behind the statistics dreams, just like you and I dream. In our case, our dreams inspire us to action. We are here today, because we dreamed, and we were determined to fulfil our dreams, and we had many, many people who supported our dreams, our parents and communities, social services, the writers of the books we read etc. etc. And we continue to dream, even if in my case and the case of many of my age, we might dream of what might have been, of opportunities missed, of what we would like to have done differently. Now we tailor our dreams to the reality of our ageing legs and minds. But in the case of a few of us like for example the founding trustees of Muslim Aid – beginning with the one and only Yusuf Islam famously known as Cat Stevens – the fulfilment of our dreams serves as an inspiration to a new generation. For example the dream that one day all children in every part of the world will be equally cherished, equally protected, equally cared for – if not by their birth parents but by families and other guardians around the world. Muslim Aid's Rainbow Family Programme works on turning this dream into a reality.

Every child you meet dreams of going to school and making a better life for themselves. But just like ourselves, these children need support; they need the supportive environment in which they can fulfil their dreams. And the good news is that there are many adults who refuse to be put off by the magnitude of the task. People like Yusuf Islam. Part, or all, of their dream is to fulfil the dreams of others. Muslim Aid is providing this supportive environment to orphan and street children in Bangladesh – through food aid, through mentoring programmes and stipends so that these children can complete their education from primary school to university and become healthy, independent, productive members of their communities and the world. By supporting children who have suffered tragic losses, you are helping to build the country's next generation of teachers, entrepreneurs and leaders. Their inclusion is not only a matter of social justice and the realization of universal human rights; it is an essential investment in the future of society! Education is the currency of the Information Age, no longer just a pathway to opportunity and success but a prerequisite. Our future is inextricably linked to the education of our children – all of them. In the European Union we believe that talent and virtue, needed in a free society, should be educated regardless of wealth or birth. The promise of education is that no matter what we look like or where we come from or who our parents

are, each of us should have the opportunity to fulfil our God-given potential. True to the motto you can find in one of Cat Steven's songs² that have inspired me so much when I was young: *"If you want to sing out, sing out. And if you want to be free, be free. 'Cause there's a million things to be... You can do what you want. The opportunity's on."* No child must be left behind! Muslim Aid has understood this and undertakes sustainable projects to empower individuals to fulfil their true potential and become independent & self-reliant.

What can we all do? It is very simple. First, we have to hear the dreams of these children. Secondly, once we have heard those dreams we have to find ways of making them a reality. We have to raise the profile of these children and force the world to turn its attention where many would rather not look – like we do on an occasion like today – so that all institutions in society, government, NGOs, religions, donors, ensure that the missing faces are no longer missing opportunities but can grow to fulfil the dreams and the dreams of their communities. In this way, we begin to form an alliance for and with vulnerable children. An alliance of NGOs, and churches and mosques, and business people and parliamentarians, and government officials and donors, an alliance that is expressed in the deliberate allocation of resources to ensuring that no child goes missing, and every child can attain their dream. For to attain their dream, they need schools, they need health facilities, they need trained teachers and health workers, they need support structures in their communities. Our dreams and the dreams of our children cannot be fulfilled until the dreams of all are being fulfilled. And things only happen because people make them happen.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the hearts of small children are delicate organs. A cruel beginning in this world can twist them into curious shapes. The heart of a hurt child can shrink so that forever afterward it is hard and pitted as the seed of a peach. Or, again, the heart of such a child may fester and swell until it is misery to carry within the body, easily chafed and hurt by the most ordinary things³. It is not the physical pain that endangers orphans the most. It is the mental pain caused by stress from years and years of being neglected, pushed aside, disregarded, unloved, and made to feel undeserving, and made to feel like a possession rather than an equal human being. Even more it is the lack of unconditional love, the right to be accepted, as a child and to be loved, as a child, no matter what you do is the most

² "If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out", "Life", "Father & Son", "Lady D'Arbanville", "Morning Has Broken", "Wild World", "The First Cut is The Deepest", etc.

³ Carson McCullers (February 19, 1917 – September 29, 1967) was an American writer. She wrote novels, short stories, and two plays, as well as essays and some poetry. Her first novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* explores the spiritual isolation of misfits and outcasts of the South. Her other novels have similar themes and are all set in the South.

wounding. And when there is not love for a child to remember, then there is nothing for the child to remember except the hate. Love heals people – both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it⁴. It makes the difference – or to use again lyrics by Cat Stevens⁵: "*Life you make it what it is, love can change it with a kiss*". When preparing this speech I came across a story⁶ of a fifteen-year-old boy in an orphans' home who had an incurable stutter. One Sunday the minister was detained and the boy volunteered to say the prayer in his stead. He did it perfectly, without a single stutter. Later he explained, "I don't stutter when I talk to God. He loves me."

Ladies and Gentlemen, let us not forget that a change of attitude brings about the biggest change in the lives of these children. I am confident that, in partnership, we can give these children the feeling of being cherished and bring about a real transformation in the lives of orphan and street children in this country. Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced. As long as we never forget that every life is a miracle and each person has something to contribute, we will finish the job. Change begins with an honest examination of one's own attitudes and each of us has to contribute. May I close by quoting my famous fellow countryman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe⁷ in this respect: "If you treat an individual... as if he were what he ought to be and could be, he will become what he ought to be and could be".

Thank you for your attention.

⁴ "It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself" (Ralph Waldo Emerson, May 25, 1803 – April 27, 1882, was an American philosopher, lecturer, essayist, and poet, best remembered for leading the Transcendentalist movement of the mid-19th century. He was seen as a champion of individualism and a prescient critic of the countervailing pressures of society.)

⁵ From the song "Life"

⁶ Story accredited to Bennett Cerf (May 25, 1898 – August 27, 1971, publisher and co-founder of Random House; Cerf's talent in building and maintaining relationships brought contracts with writers such as William Faulkner, John O'Hara, Eugene O'Neill, James Michener, Truman Capote, Theodor Seuss Geisel, and others, who were among the greatest writers of the day)

⁷ (28 August 1749 – 22 March 1832) Goethe is considered by many to be the most important writer in the German language and one of the most important thinkers in Western culture.