

Statement by Ambassador Bagher Asadi, Chairman of the Group of 77 (Islamic Republic of Iran), at the 11th Annual Observance of the International Day of Older Persons

New York, 4 October 2001

Madam Chair,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I should take the opportunity to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the NGO Committee on Aging, UN Programme on Ageing and the Department of Public Information for the very kind invitation. And I am very happy to be here today with all of you. This time every year is a very busy and engaging season at the UN. It is more so this year, in a sense, because of the horrendous terroristic acts on September 11th. The mere reason that we are meeting here and not at the Headquarters, as originally scheduled, is indicative of the impact of those tragic events. I have on previous occasions extended, on behalf of the Group of 77 – the developing community at the United Nations – our deepest condolences and sympathy to the Government and People of the United States and to the families and relatives of the victims of those inhuman acts.

Having listened to the message from the Secretary-General, and the very interesting and rich words of Ambassador Arias (Spain) and Princess Dona Cristina of Spain, I had the feeling that I wish I could compete with them in brevity. Well, I can't. At the United Nation, we diplomats tend to make long speeches. Please bear with me. Turning to the substance of the matter at hand, today I am supposed to talk about the expectations and outcomes of the 2nd World Assembly on Ageing, obviously from the perspective of developing countries. We in the developing world look at the Second World Assembly on Ageing as a watershed for our countries and societies in terms of the national policies on ageing to effectively deal with what is increasingly being referred to as a demographic agequake – and we are all living in age when new concepts keep being coined, hence the “agequake”. Statistics have already established that eighty percent of the world's population of six billion people live in developing countries. By the year 2050, it is estimated that the total of those aged 60 years and older will double worldwide but actually triple in developing countries concomitant with a sharp decline in birth rates by almost a half. Of particular significance is the fact that unlike many developed countries which benefited from a transition period of 100 years before the doubling of their older populations, developing countries will witness an explosion of their older population within twenty five years or less.

Given these stark statistics, the developing countries that constitute the Group of 77 have a strong interest in a substantive and realistic outcome of the Second World Assembly on Ageing. The older generation has always been important pillars in our societies, conveying wisdom, values, insight and advice that have perpetuated their active role in our lives. Nevertheless, we recognize that rapid changes are taking place in our societies that are already having an impact on the lives of the older persons. Family structures are changing; the role of government is under review; income and employment opportunities are different, pensions are not always adequate, migration of youths are on the rise and services and support systems for the elderly may be lacking.

Most developing countries participated in the review of the outcome of the First World Assembly on Ageing and are quite cognizant of the fact that despite the positive aspects of that Plan of Action, the recommendations contained therein were more suited to the needs of developed countries. It would be recalled that the Plan set out sixty two recommendations for action in seven areas of concern to older persons namely health and nutrition; protection of elderly consumers; housing and environment; family; social welfare; income security and employment; and education. Given the broad scope of the Plan, most governments were able to formulate and adapt their policies to better support their aged population. That Plan was also instrumental in focusing international attention on issues of importance to that generation. This

global rethinking eventually led to the formulation and adoption of the 18 United Nations Principles for Older Persons, a general comment on the economic, social and cultural rights of older persons, observance of the year 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons and greater awareness of the importance of the theme "A Society for All Ages" for long-term policy formulation on ageing.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The initiative of a society for all ages highlights the inadequacy of simply restricting analysis to the situation of older persons. In focusing on individual lifelong development, greater attention has been given to promoting a lifetime approach to education, health, employment and the upgrading of skills. Similarly, with medical advances and longer life expectancy worldwide, more generations are interacting amongst each other thus requiring some attention to multigenerational relationships. At the same time in an era of globalization, increased poverty and marginalization of sections of society, the issue of population ageing and development cannot be ignored. Indeed, the UN conferences of the 1990s and their review processes – all sharing the important premise of placing people at the centre of development - continue to make a significant contribution to the debate and policy formulation on integrating all groups of society for national development.

A few weeks ago, the chairperson of the preparatory committee for the Second World Assembly on Ageing circulated a preliminary strategy for action on ageing for consideration by Member States. This text will be the basis for negotiations in December. The substantive contents of the text must be commended since it has clearly drawn lessons from recent development-related processes that would have an impact on the elderly. The Group of 77 is still formulating its position on this text. And I suppose this should not be the proper occasion for me to preempt their final conclusions in this regard. That would not, of course, prevent me from sharing some initial thoughts with you.

From our point of view, it is important that the 2002 Strategy be primarily a forward-looking document that takes into account the special needs and challenges facing the older population, particularly in developing countries. As intimated earlier, this segment of the population is rarely considered dependents in our societies and their active participation in public and private life is fully appreciated. Many are engaged in volunteer work, self help activities, farming and giving practical support to their families and communities. To cite an example, it has been observed that the advent of the HIV/AIDS pandemic has demonstrated in the heavily afflicted societies the significant contribution of grandparents, especially grandmothers, to the wellbeing of orphans. It is, therefore, hoped that promoting and supporting active lifestyles becomes an important theme of the new International Strategy. At the same time, the vulnerabilities of this segment of society should not be ignored. In many cases, they become victims of mental health problems, poverty-related illness, violence and abuse. The needs of the disabled, rural and indigenous elderly should receive due attention. Similarly, older migrants face specific circumstances that constrain the realization of their full potential.

The Beijing Platform for Action had comprehensively proposed an agenda for women's empowerment aimed at "removing all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision making". The recommendations contained therein should also be an underlying theme of the 2002 International Strategy on Ageing as it attempts to mainstream a gender perspective. The critical areas of concern of Beijing have not been overcome - poverty, access to basic social services, violence, armed conflict, discrimination and violation of the rights of women continue to be important challenges that also confront older women.

Finally, let me just add a word on what I consider central to the whole idea of the on-going preparatory process and the Assembly itself. We all should endeavour, to the best of our abilities, to ensure the promotion of a positive image of the ageing process so that older persons' contribution to society are recognized and fostered. There is growing consensus that the more elders are seen as living, respected and productive lives,

greater will be the support from the wider community to provide an enabling environment for their survival and continued contribution. Many countries are witnessing the increasing divide between youths and the elderly as rapid changes in society transform value systems and traditional practices. The decisions taken by youths are increasingly influenced by their peers and their own thoughts on longevity, survival, their ability to make a long-term contribution to society and the socio-economic conditions of their parents, grandparents and great grandparents. All actors, including the media and academia, have a role in ensuring that the ageing process is not seen as a path to dependency and victimization, rather, as a continuation of personal achievement and participation in daily life.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Second World Assembly on Ageing must produce an outcome that will have an impact for all the elderly - rich and poor, male and female, married, widowed or single. The elderly themselves must be part of this process as information is gathered and policy decisions are made. On this International Day of Older Persons, let us strengthen our resolve to ensure that the global phenomenon of ageing is addressed in an urgent and timely manner for the continued integration and empowerment of older persons.

I thank you all very much for your kind indulgence.

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