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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority theme: rethinking and strengthening social
development in the contemporary world**

Statement submitted by Shia Rights Watch Inc, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Social Development and the Promotion of Religious Freedom for Shia Muslims

On behalf of Shia Muslims around the world it is a pleasure to be able to present this address to the Commission. Social development is an important tool in lifting nations out of poverty as it attempts to put the individual at the centre of development operations. By developing a greater understanding of how individuals influence development processes, we can work to craft more inclusive and socially conscious programs going forward. Shia Rights Watch would like to emphasize the importance of guaranteeing the uninhibited access of religious minorities to development programs.

Please note that this statement uses the Shia minority as an example and this model can be applied for all groups. We use this population because our NGO's specialty is focused on this group.

Putting individuals at the centre of development establishes a basis for tolerance and diversity, and ensures that change comes from the bottom up rather than from the top down. The International Institute for Social Studies compiled a list of indices of social development which measure informal institutions across nations in an attempt to conceptualize the progress of social development around the world. These indices are: civil activism, clubs and associations, intergroup cohesion, interpersonal safety and trust, and gender equality. Shia Rights Watch argues that in places around the world with sizeable Shia populations, improvements in these areas are stifled and neglected by authorities.

Civic activism has been high in many Shia communities around the world, and this has only increased since 2011. While this activism could have been harnessed to facilitate greater dialogue between the state and its citizens, in many places these displays of activism were severely repressed. Currently many Shia Muslims are facing jail time and execution due to their involvement with the wave of protests that emerged in 2011. Despite the repression, civil activism has continued and Shia Muslims have worked to remain mobilized. It is time that repression of civic activism is called out by the international community.

Shia clubs and associations have been subject to arbitrary censorship and even prohibition. This restriction of the free expression of Shia Muslims further removes them from the development process.

Intergroup cohesion has been suffering in many states where significant Shia populations are located. Sermons and school curriculums have been documented as containing hate speech that incites violence against Shia Muslims. Some of these materials contain language similar to that displayed by terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaida. In many respects, efforts at development and countering extremism will fail unless greater intergroup cohesion is reached. Efforts at greater intergroup cohesion cannot only be implemented from the top down, they must also permeate the smaller networks of people such as religious communities and individual families.

As a result of the hate speech that has been directed towards Shia Muslims, there have been numerous manifestations of physical violence against the group.

Shootings and bombings have become regular practices for extremist groups against Shia Muslims, who they believe are heretics. This has taken an immense human toll on Shia communities. This toll has been even more significant as militant groups have systematically targeted Shia intellectuals and business owners. The targeting exemplified here shows the desire to both violently and economically cripple Shia communities. Significant social development will not occur in countries with sizeable Shia populations if the threat of physical violence persists.

This threat of physical violence has been aided by officials who have done little to investigate and prosecute crimes against Shia. Bombings and shootings against Shia Muslims largely occur without retribution either on the individuals committing the acts or the organizations facilitating the acts. This slow response by governing authorities has significantly reduced trust for the institutions designed to protect them. Without trust as a basis for development, the aspirations proclaimed in this committee will largely go unheeded.

Respect for free expression, judicial reform, protection of safety, greater intergroup cohesion, and a rebuilding of trust must be the foundation for social development efforts in Shia communities. When we are able to move past the elements of divisive governance and put individuals at the centre of development, we will be able to achieve a more unified and prosperous society.
