



Remarks by United Nations Resident Coordinator in Egypt, James W. Rawley, at the Opening of the CARAVAN Interfaith Arts Festival and Exhibition “My Neighbour” and “The Peoples’ Egypt since 25th January”

**St. John’s Church, Maadi, Cairo
12 May 2011**

The Most Reverend Dr. Mouneer H. Anis, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Egypt and North Africa

His Excellency Bishop Botros of the Coptic Orthodox Church,
Representatives of the Muslim and Christian Communities in Egypt, especially the delegation of Imams from Alexandria,

Reverend Paul-Gordon Chandler, Rector of St. John’s Church

Distinguished dignitaries

Excellencies - Ambassadors

Dear Friends

On behalf of the United Nations, I am deeply honoured to deliver opening remarks at the official inauguration of the CARAVAN Festival of the Arts, whose themes this year are, quite appropriately, “My Neighbour” and “The Peoples Egypt since 25th January”. Thank you for allowing me a few words on why this Festival, in addition to being a very pleasant way to spend a few evenings, is of profound significance for each of us, and for Egypt at this time.

Tonight’s opening event of the art exhibition representing the works of some 50 premier Arab and Western artists from East and West, followed by an evening this Saturday with the best-selling Egyptian novelist Khaled Al-Khamissi, and concluding with a concert next Thursday by the world-renowned oriental flute player Mohammed Antar are, at one level, all about wonderful art in its visual, written and musical forms – something to be enjoyed, a feast for the eyes and the ears.

Yet these events, this Caravan, are more than simply first-rate entertainment. They are also about art as a medium to bring us closer to our spiritual selves, thus making our lives deeper, richer and more meaningful; with art serving as a ‘connecting rod’ within ourselves, communicating our senses with our soul.

And, on another level, this festival is about how art can build bridges of understanding and respect, of friendship and sharing, between Christians and Muslims, a theme I will return to in a moment.

This Festival of the Arts perfectly embodies the sentiment of a recent UN General Assembly resolution (A/65/5) entitled “World Interfaith Harmony Week”, which aims to spread “the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill in the world’s churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship... based on love of God and love of one’s neighbour, or on

love of the good and love of one's neighbour, each according to their own religious traditions or convictions."

In drawing attention to this General Assembly decision, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon wrote: "The first World Interfaith Harmony Week is an opportunity to focus global attention on the efforts of religious leaders, interfaith movements and individuals around the world to promote mutual respect and understanding between followers of different faiths and beliefs. Respect for diversity and peaceful dialogue are essential if the human family is to cooperate globally to face shared threats and seize common opportunities".

Of course, this year's Festival takes on an added significance in light of the inspiring events of Tahrir Square, where Egyptians and friends of Egypt (including some who are here tonight) displayed great courage – the courage to stand for justice, the courage to demand their rights and reclaim their dignity, the courage to come together in the name of the Egyptian people to build a better future for all.

They stood steadfast in the Square – young and old ... women and men ... Muslims and Christians ... from the Delta to the Upper Nile ... laying a foundation for a new Egypt, one that could serve as a model for a new Middle East with dignity and justice for all ... a Middle East at peace.

This courage, this determination, this sense of dignity and hope for Egypt and beyond is brilliantly captured in the artistic works that you will be seeing in a few moments.

The revolution in Egypt represents the greatest opportunity to advance democracy and human rights in a generation. This opportunity is precious but, at the same time, fragile. It must be nurtured and carefully handled by the people who created it.

All of us are deeply disturbed by the recent violence between Muslims and Copts in Egypt, including the deadly clashes the other night in Cairo. After the prolonged display of national unity that led to the peaceful transition of power, it is critical that the Egyptian people maintain that unity of purpose to achieve their democratic aspirations.

Sectarian violence must not create an obstacle to further progress towards a more free, just and harmonious Egypt. The UN Secretary-General has reminded the new authorities that they must honour the responsibility and trust they have been given. People went on the streets to call for accountability, democracy, human rights and better prospects. Their leaders must work to meet these demands. The UN and other international partners stand ready to support them in this regard.

Yet, this responsibility is not confined to the authorities and the international community; it also rests with each and every Egyptian, and with the friends of Egypt, all of whom need to contribute to transforming the spirit of Tahrir Square and the sacrifices of so many into a new Egypt.

And that's why this event, is so profoundly significant. For, in the words of Reverend Paul-Gordon Chandler, who has done so much to promote understanding and respect between Faiths and between East and West, this Festival is about the arts serving as a medium to build bridges of friendship and sharing between Christians and Muslims, and with it, respect for diversity, for peaceful dialogue, and trust among individuals and communities.

It's about a journey away from sectarian tension and violence, which thrives in isolation and apartness. It's about breaking down the confining walls that breed suspicion and hatred. It's about moving towards an understanding and respect for the other, whether he or she is a Muslim or Christian, believer or non-believer, woman or man, young or old.

Fundamentally, it's about strengthening values and, in so doing, making Egyptian society more resilient to forces such as sectarian tensions that threaten to undermine the revolution and the opportunities it has presented to create a new Egypt.

The artists exhibiting here tonight have interpreted the theme "My Neighbour" and "The Peoples' Egypt since 25th January" in a wide variety of creative ways. One that strikes me as highly relevant and deeply moving in light of recent events is a painting by Ahmed Selim entitled "Protecting the Neighbour". In the description accompanying his painting, Ahmed indicates that his work strives to depict "neighbourliness" as a relationship among neighbours characterized by friendship and love, by mutual reliability, and when necessary, by neighbours protecting each other. Indeed, it's about neighbours having a *right* to be protected by their neighbours when the need arises.

Distinguished Dignitaries, Excellencies, Friends

Let this Festival of Arts entertain us.

Let it also contribute to our spiritual growth and well being.

And let this Caravan carry us towards greater mutual understanding and respect, towards neighbourliness - the antidote to sectarian tensions and violence - towards an Egypt reborn, an Egypt that is a model for the region, indeed for the world.

Thank you for coming this evening to attend the opening of this year's Festival of Arts at St. John's Church.

And, thank you for your personal commitment to forge the new Egypt.