

Dr. Pallam Raju, Minister for HRD, Government of India, Mr. Najeeb Jung, Vice Chancellor, Dr. SM Sajid, Registrar and Prof SM Rashid, Pro Vice Chancellor

Faculty members, students, friends and associates.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you this evening, where we mark the opening of our modest but new official premises which captures, I believe, the diversity, vibrancy, beauty but also the challenges and difficulties before the North-eastern region and its peoples. The North East Centre in Jamia is young, barely four years old, but in its short but eventful existence has organized a burst of research, seminars and analysis on a range of issues which resonate in the region: from women's concerns to governance, immigration, natural disasters and human-induced ones, conflict and peace, rights and opportunities. We have developed partnerships with other departments, enabling synergy, while cultural events and exhibitions have also captured the nuances of our region.

This journey would not have been possible without the support of the Vice Chancellor and the Jamia administration and I would like to acknowledge that at the very start, including the Finance Dept. We are missing two of our major speakers today: Mr. Jairam Ramesh had accepted our invitation while forgetting that he had also agreed to deliver a lecture elsewhere in the city but has promised to come separately and Mr. Lalthanhawla, the Mizoram Chief Minister, had to rush to his state yesterday.

We acknowledge the strong support of the Ministry of HRD and especially the UGC is making possible the construction of an independent Centre elsewhere on campus with space for a multiplicity of activities, including research labs, auditoriums for cultural performances, seminar rooms, library/documentation centre and the hire of new faculty and staff. I also take on board the Hon'ble Minister's suggestion for developing a museum of the North-east here.

We are here today also because of a young scholar, Dr. Biswajeet Saikia, who persuaded me that it was important to establish such a Centre for NE Studies at Jamia. Biswajeet is not with us today to see the fulfilment of this dream but we are starting a process through the University for his Papers to be archived and accessible to researchers. Our loss is immeasurable because he was bursting with energy, ideas and work. We are grateful to his wife, Dr. Alka Saikia, for her gift of his papers and books.

One of the priorities of our centre is to promote the cultures of peace for which the North-east is not known. We will be looking at where these obstacles lie, in understanding and misunderstanding, in issues of corruption and misgovernance which have meant that there is a growth of poverty and exclusion despite good intentions. Constitution provisions such as the Sixth Schedule provide scope for innovation and flexibility, there are robust democratic traditions but we also see contradictions in gender relations, social and economic disparities within the region, the contestation of the Idea of India, suspicion of 'outsiders' and the 'other' and in laws which are constantly challenged.

These issues need to be rigorously researched. But we need to go beyond that to providing a platform for the application of ideas in the human laboratory that a University like Jamia is. We offer space, opportunities and platforms for voices, forums and collaboration with scholars and others from the region, drawing on their expertise and knowledge to bring energy and policy review on all these and other issues. We need to give space to silenced voices: Much remains to be done -- for

instance, the decades of conflict in Mizoram are simply known as the 'troubles' and few have really researched or worked on them.

We are located today at a critical time as older conflicts appear to be finally winding down although new ones are emerging: yet, the peace constituency, added to public fatigue, democratic processes and dialogue are winning out. But we need to examine how women have carried multiple burdens of pain and tragedy: how do they cope, how are societies coping or failing to do so? The opportunity for research in this window of opportunity and impacting policy positively is immense.

Martin Luther King said 'Men hate each other because they fear each other, they fear each other because they do not know each other, and they do not know each other because they do not communicate with each other, they do not communicate because they are separate.' Our role is to bridge that gap and help the other become us. For it is in the heart of a University, in its space and spirit of learning, that old hurts and wounds can be healed and understood, not in or by Government. And as we converse and dialogue, the ninth state of the North east takes shape – and that state is Delhi. So we claim Delhi for our own and we are grateful that Jamia has enabled us to do that.

I now hand over to the Vice Chancellor who will be presiding.

#### Closing Remarks:

I would like to thank the Hon'ble Minister for HRD, Mr. MM Pallam Raju, for his presence and support to the issues of the region and the work of the Centre and University. The Vice Chancellor Mr. Najeeb Jung for unstinted backing and the Administration. I would like especially to express our

appreciation to Preeti Gill who, drawing on her extensive travels and research in the region, has designed the space with sensitivity and grace.

I acknowledge the tireless role of our faculty and staff, K. Kokho, Asst. Prof., Fatima Khan, office Assistant, Munna, our peon, my colleagues in AIS for their interest, our volunteers Mehruz, Sarah, Afshan, Hafeez, Koktiba Sangtam, Pam Reishang. Anamika Debroy for rapporteuring. The Chief Minister of Mizoram in his message recalls that the NE Centre here was the only place outside of Mizoram to hold a seminar marking the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the state's peace accord, a process that is unmatched anywhere in the country. I quote: "One has to see and understand the complex background of the region to be able to appreciate its problems honestly, accurately and with sympathy. In this I am sure, the Centre would play a pivotal role ... to bridge the gap between the North East and the rest of India.

May I now invite all of you to join us for tea below.