TESTO 1

Speech by Francesco Frangialli, Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organization, at the opening of the First Islamic Conference of Tourism Ministers (Isfahan, Islamic Republic of Iran, 3 October 2000)

Honourable Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It has been a great honour for me to accept your invitation and to represent today the World Tourism Organization at this First Islamic Conference of Tourism Ministers.

It is also with delight that I return to Isfahan, this jewel of civilization, this treasure-house of the heritage of mankind, the capital of several kingdoms throughout its rich history and a major stopping place on the ancient Silk Road, which has gained a new lease of life from tourism through the joint efforts of UNESCO and the World Tourism Organization. It was in this prestigious city that our Organization held the meeting of its Commission for South Asia in 1991.

It is, finally, a great pleasure to visit Iran for the second time in just over one year, having been here in February the day before the general elections, which represented a new and important stage in the march forward of Iranian society.

Honourable Ministers,

Iran is not the only Islamic State to have made the decisive choice to open up to tourism, and to international tourism in particular. For Islam, a religion of love and tolerance, is naturally inclined to welcoming foreign visitors. Does it not, more than any other religion, place pilgrimage — that is to say, travel — at the heart of its concerns? Does it not affirm that travel makes it easier to distinguish truth from falsehood? «Travel in the land...» says Sura 6 of the Koran.

In this spirit, major Muslim countries have already consolidated their position as destinations that count on the world tourism map. Their success is reflected in the facts: the Middle East and the Maghreb together made up the region with the fastest tourism growth in 1999.

Others have undertaken to join them, especially countries with abundant mineral and energy resources, such as the United Arab Emirates, Libya and Algeria, which are concerned with their long-term future and the diversification of their economies. Some of them are calling on the World Tourism Organization to help them manage as efficiently as possible the development they hope tourism will bring in its wake. More recently, Saudi Arabia made the strategic choice to open up to international tourism, a move we warmly welcome.

All the countries represented here today have spoken of their resolve not to remain aloof from this irresistible movement. They wish to join in this tourism revolution that, two centuries after the industrial revolution, is sweeping through all the regions of the world.
In the past fifty years, tourism and leisure, the chief component of a rapidly growing service sector, have galvanized economic development. Having initially taken root in the countries of Europe and North America with a long industrial tradition, it has spread to a number of developing countries in Asia, the Middle East and Africa. All these countries have reaped the benefits; they have discovered that where tourism advances poverty retreats.

An important contributor to the balance of payments, tourism has been a prodigious creator of value-added wealth and jobs. It has opened up new prospects, mainly in the countries of the South, for entrepreneurship and individual self-fulfilment. Being one of the rare activities that can replace traditional farming and breeding that are fast disappearing and a changing manufacturing industry, it provides an exceptional opportunity for economic revival and redeployment of manpower in declining regions.

But tourism is not just a simple economic phenomenon, important as this may be. Its social and cultural dimensions are equally remarkable. Since it promotes encounters and dialogue between visitor and host and notwithstanding the obvious difficulties of such relations, it has furthered mutual knowledge and the reciprocal recognition of individuals and groups in both national communities and international exchanges.

For this reason, this Conference represents an event of a major importance: it will contribute to a better perception and a more equitable understanding of the Islamic civilisation by the rest of the world tourism community.

Positive or negative, the social and cultural impact of tourism is fraught with consequences. This fundamental fact means that its development should be guided, that the liberalization of trade in this sector should be kept under control and that a certain number of rules should be laid down and observed as a matter of principle. It would be wrong to justify, in the name of economic progress and freedom of tourism trade, the irreversible deterioration of sites, the over-use of natural resources, the impairment of biodiversity, the degradation of historic monuments, the unlimited exploitation of workers uprooted from the areas around resorts, the decline in cultural production and craftsmanship, the debasement of moral values, organized sex tourism and the exploitation of children.

It is in the industry's own interest to avoid sacrificing everything to short-term profitability and to give future generations a chance to discover, when their turn comes, the natural and cultural heritage on which, when all is said and done, tourism relies for its development.