*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim*. In God’s name; The Beneficent, The Merciful.

Distinguished participants, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

*Assalamualaikum*, Good morning.

Let me warmly welcome every one of you for making the effort to be with us here in this collective effort, to make this occasion a success. Your presence here is very meaningful, I’m very delighted to see representatives and speakers of nearly all faith communities in Malaysia, in multi-religious community of Malaysia.

It is not very often that we all come together, this occasion itself is a moment to celebrate. We are here to celebrate the World Interfaith Harmony Week in connection with the Interfaith Refugee Day. There are certain events that combine both happiness and sorrow and I think this is one of them; happiness because we are together for a noble cause, and we are together to commemorate also the noble effort of people or who have introduced such events, World Interfaith Harmony Week.

But it is also a moment for sorrow, look at those faces, and those are not odd individuals, and we read that there are more than 65 million displaced, dispossessed refugees. This is something that is telling a narrative of disappointment. Clearly, that values have collapsed. Why is this happening? Such a very large number, probably the largest number in history. It is because of violence, oppression, and persecution by misguided individuals and groups and states. There is so much militarism, so much violence and we have been witnesses to conflict after conflict and attack after attack in each of them add to those numbers of refugees.

To become a refugee, to have to leave your homeland, family, belonging is a momentous, horrendous experience fraught with fear and uncertainty. It so happened that Islam history is closely associated with migration which linked to refugee status. Islam emerged in fact in Mecca in a pagan environment. The first early Muslim was subjected to persecution, so much so that they had to leave their homeland on two occasions. A small number went to Ethiopia; they were received with dignity and friendship by the Emperor Lagos at that time, who gave them a space.

The second event, the larger event, when the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and his followers had to leave Mecca for Madinah. And we have the narrative of this *Muhajirun* and *Ansar*, the migrants and the helpers. *Ansar*, the helpers were those who received these migrants in Madinah. There was a happy episode, so much so that there was a treaty of brotherhood, established among them, known as *muwakhat*. That is the kind of episode you read in the history of Islam and it featured prominently, this event of migration in status of refugee probably prominently in the Quran itself.

But those experiences stand back in history. Those refugees were well received, we see it, that is something that we have lost touch of. We have refugees in very large numbers, in different countries, but they do not have rights. They cannot work, they cannot send their children to school, and they are, whether there are health services and other services, there are equal participants in those, the answer to many of them is unfortunately in the negative.

To say something about World Interfaith Harmony Week, this was introduced by United Nations at the initiative of the King of Jordan, King Abdullah in September 2010 unanimously approved by the United Nations General Assembly that eventually assign the first week of February as the World Interfaith Harmony Week. And we celebrate it today with the refugee day. The question arises whether harmony has become a reality, are we really further far removed from the spirit of that event. Clearly, the answer is that it has not become, if you have 65 million refugees and dispossessed people, you can hardly say that the world has moved closer to harmony.

Harmony is built on certain foundations, one is among the faith community, recognition (*at-ta’aruf*), well we read in the Quran, “*to you your religion and to me my religion”,* this is in Chapter 96, verse 5 of the Quran. It was also featured in the document of the Constitution of Madinah. Well, the Prophet signed the contract with the Jews and the Christians and it is stated there, ‘to you your religion, and to me mine’. This is mutual recognition; you do not deny. I think that is one basis of harmony. Another basis of harmony is a certain awareness of the human fraternity, and again in this connection, we read in the Quran, surah 49, *Al-Hujurat*, verse 13 which begins, *“O mankind, We created you from a male in a female, and made you into community in nations, so that you may know one another, and the most noble of you is the most conscious of you, of piety of values what it means to be a human being”*. Here the message to the whole of mankind, we are brethren in humanity, we are created from a single male in a female, made into community, the purpose is we develop recognition and friendship. And then, a certain advice that we again find in the Quran, provided that the non-Muslims are not aggressive toward you, they have not expelled you from your home, you should be just and you should treat them well. This is the Quranic advice to the Muslims. So long as those non-Muslims who live with you side-by-side with you, or with your neighbours, you should treat them well and with justice. I think these are the three basis where you can expect the harmony can develop.

The narrative, the episode that follows in the background of this World Interfaith Harmony Week was based on some background event, a common word between us and you, an important event that occurred in 2007. The Muslims after the Pope Benedict delivered the lecture in 2006, and said some derogatory remarks on Islam. The Muslims community approached the Vatican and they were in counters, and the Muslim community proposed a Quranic idea, *‘let’s come together over a common word that is common between us and you*”, love of God and love of neighbor, and this was welcomed and the common word initiative. I was in fact the original signatory of this initiative that was again introduced by Jordan. And that led to this World Interfaith Harmony Week. But there were three other events, I will not give a lot of details, also that occurred in the United Nations and all the three also initiated by Muslim leaders. One of them was a President Khatami’s idea in 1997 introduced in the United Nations General Assembly at that time when talk of clash of civilisation was gaining traction, he introduced the idea of dialogue of civilisations. And then we had in 2004 at the initiative of Turkey and Spain, the idea of the alliance of civilisation. And then we had in September 2010 when Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib, he introduced World Movement of Moderates. And moderation, *wasatiyyah* that we have now as government programmes and have been celebrating in Malaysia.

These three initiatives as well as World Interfaith Harmony Week have all been taken by Muslim leaders, but unfortunately when we see the experiences, we celebrate those but the experiences on the ground are such that only Turkey and Egypt have signed the WHCR convention. The refugees have rights, they can work and they can participate in the services and so on. So many other country of the Muslim world, they have not signed it. This is an opportunity to remind ourselves it is our hope in our prayer that the cause of the helplessness, the kind of suffering that refugees communities; Rohingyas, Syrians, Afghans, Libyans, and you name it in millions, they are refugees. They need protection and I think that we could do better than we have done in the past. Let us hope that this moment of togetherness for all faith community that are present here, that our voices are heard, that there is improvement and there is serious attention to their predicament. If we were to make this idea of World Interfaith Harmony Week meaningful and significant, then that what we should do. Thank you.