

President Ahmadinejad addresses students at Columbia University

Sept 25, 2007

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad expounded on important international and regional issues in a speech given to academics at the prestigious University of Columbia in New York on Monday

The following is the full text of President's speech:

In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful:

The president recites verses from the holy Koran in Arabic.

"Oh, God, hasten the arrival of Imam al-Mahdi and grant him good health and victory and make us his followers and those to attest to his rightfulness."

Distinguished Dean, dear professors and students, ladies and gentlemen, at the outset I would like to extend my greetings to all of you. I am grateful to the almighty God for providing me with the opportunity to be in an academic environment, those seeking truth and striving for the promotion of science and knowledge.

At the outset I want to complain a bit from the person who read this political statement against me. In Iran tradition requires that when we demand a person to invite to be a speaker we actually respect our students and the professors by allowing them to make their own judgment and we don't think it's necessary before this speech is even given to come in with a series of claims and to attempt in a so-called manner to provide vaccination of some sort to our students and our faculty.

I think the text read by the dear gentleman here, more than addressing me, was an insult to information and the knowledge of the audience here. In a university environment we must allow people to speak their mind, to allow everyone to talk so that the truth is eventually revealed by all.

Certainly he took more than all the time I was allocated to speak, and that's fine with me. We'll just leave that to add up with the claims of respect for freedom and the freedom of speech that's given to us in this country.

Many parts of his speech, there were many insults and claims that were incorrect, regretfully.

Of course, I think that he was affected by the press, the media, and the political, sort of, mainstream line that you read here that goes against the very grain of the need for peace and stability in the world around us.

Nonetheless, I should not begin by being affected by this unfriendly treatment. I will tell you what I have to say, and then the questions he can raise and I'll be happy to provide answers. But as for one of the issues that he did raise, I most certainly would need to elaborate further so that we, for ourselves, can see how things fundamentally work.

It was my decision in this valuable forum and meeting to speak with you about the importance of knowledge, of information, of education. Academics and religious scholars are shining torches who shed light in order to remove darkness. And the ambiguities around us in guiding humanity out of ignorance and perplexity.

The key to the understanding of the realities around us rests in the hands of the researchers, those who seek to discover areas that are hidden, the unknown sciences, the windows of realities that they can open is done only through efforts of the scholars and the learned people in this world.

With every effort there is a window that is opened, and one reality is discovered. Whenever the high stature of science and wisdom is preserved and the dignity of scholars and researchers are respected, humans have taken great strides toward their material and spiritual promotion.

In contrast, whenever learned people and knowledge have been neglected, humans have become stranded in the darkness of ignorance and negligence.

If it were not for human instinct, which tends toward continual discovery of truth, humans would have always remained stranded in ignorance and no way would not have discovered how to improve the life that we are given.

The nature of man is, in fact, a gift granted by the Almighty to all. The Almighty led mankind into this world and

granted him wisdom and knowledge as his prime gift enabling him to know his God.

In the story of Adam, a conversation occurs between the Almighty and his angels. The angels call human beings an ambitious and merciless creature and protested against his creation.

But the Almighty responded, quote, "I have knowledge of what you are ignorant of," unquote. Then the Almighty told Adam the truth. And on the order of the Almighty, Adam revealed it to the angels.

The angels could not understand the truth as revealed by the human being. The Almighty said to them, quote, " Did not I say that I am aware of what is hidden in heaven and in the universe?" unquote.

In this way the angels prostrated themselves before Adam.

In the mission of all divine prophets, the first sermons were of the words of God, and those words -- piety, faith and wisdom -- have been spread to all mankind.

Regarding the holy prophet Moses, may peace be upon him, God says, quote, "And he was taught wisdom, the divine book, the Old Testament and the New Testament. He is the prophet appointed for the sake of the children of Israel, and I rightfully brought a sign from the Almighty, holy Koran," unquote.

The first words, which were revealed to the holy prophet of Islam, call the prophet to read, quote, "Read, read in the name of your God, who supersedes everything," unquote, the Almighty, quote again, "who taught the human being with the pen," unquote. Quote, "The Almighty taught human beings what they were ignorant of," unquote.

You see, in the first verses revealed to the holy prophet of Islam, words of reading, teaching and the pen are mentioned. These verses in fact introduced the Almighty as the teacher of human beings, the teacher who taught humans what they were ignorant of.

In another part of the Koran, on the mission of the holy prophet of Islam, it is mentioned that the Almighty appointed someone from amongst the common people as their prophet in order to, quote, "read for them the divine verses," unquote, and quote again, "and purify them from ideological and ethical contamination" unquote, and quote again, "to teach them the divine book and wisdom," unquote.

My dear friends, all the words and messages of the divine prophets from Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, to David and Solomon and Moses, to Jesus and Mohammad delivered humans from ignorance, negligence, superstitions, unethical behavior, and corrupted ways of thinking, with respect to knowledge, on the path to knowledge, light and rightful ethics.

In our culture, the word science has been defined as illumination.

In fact, the science means brightness and the real science is a science which rescues the human being from ignorance, to his own benefit. In one of the widely accepted definitions of science, it is stated that it is the light which sheds to the hearts of those who have been selected by the almighty.

Therefore, according to this definition, science is a divine gift and the heart is where it resides. If we accept that science means illumination, then its scope supersedes the experimental sciences and it includes every hidden and disclosed reality.

One of the main harms inflicted against science is to limit it to experimental and physical sciences. This harm occurs even though it extends far beyond this scope. Realities of the world are not limited to physical realities and the materials, just a shadow of supreme reality. And physical creation is just one of the stories of the creation of the world.

Human being is just an example of the creation that is a combination of a material and the spirit. And another important point is the relationship of science and purity of spirit, life, behavior and ethics of the human being. In the teachings of the divine prophets, one reality shall always be attached to science; the reality of purity of spirit and good behavior. Knowledge and wisdom is pure and clear reality.

It is -- science is a light. It is a discovery of reality. And only a pure scholar and researcher, free from wrong ideologies, superstitions, selfishness and material trappings can discover -- discover the reality.

My dear friends and scholars, distinguished participants, science and wisdom can also be misused, a misuse caused by selfishness, corruption, material desires and material interests, as well as individual and group interests.

Material desires place humans against the realities of the world.

Corrupted and dependent human beings resist acceptance of reality. And even if they do accept it, they do not obey it.

There are many scholars who are aware of the realities but do not accept them. Their selfishness does not allow them to accept those realities.

Do those who, in the course of human history, wage wars, not understand the reality that lives, properties, dignity, territories, and the rights of all human beings should be respected, or did they understand it but neither have faith in nor abide by it?

My dear friends, as long as the human heart is not free from hatred, envy, and selfishness, it does not abide by the truth, by the illumination of science and science itself.

Science is the light, and scientists must be pure and pious. If humanity achieves the highest level of physical and spiritual knowledge but its scholars and scientists are not pure, then this knowledge cannot serve the interests of humanity, and several events can ensue.

First, the wrongdoers reveal only a part of the reality, which is to their own benefit, and conceal the rest. As we have witnessed with respect to the scholars of the divine religions in the past, too, unfortunately, today, we see that certain researchers and scientists are still hiding the truth from the people.

Second, science, scientists, and scholars are misused for personal, group, or party interests. So, in today's world, bullying powers are misusing many scholars and scientists in different fields with the purpose of stripping nations of their wealth.

And they use all opportunities only for their own benefit. For example, they deceive people by using scientific methods and tools. They, in fact, wish to justify their own wrongdoings, though. By creating nonexistent enemies, for example, and an insecure atmosphere, they try to control all in the name of combating insecurity and terrorism.

They even violate individual and social freedoms in their own nations under that pretext. They do not respect the privacy of their own people. They tap telephone calls and try to control their people.

They create an insecure psychological atmosphere in order to justify their warmongering acts in different parts of the world.

As another example, by using precise scientific methods and planning, they begin their onslaught on the domestic cultures of nations, the cultures which are the result of thousands of years of interaction, creativity and artistic activities.

They try to eliminate these cultures in order to separate the people from their identity and cut their bonds with their own history and values. They prepare the ground for stripping people from their spiritual and material wealth by instilling in them feelings of intimidation, desire for imitation and (inaudible) submission to oppressive powers and disability.

Making nuclear, chemical and biological bombs and weapons of mass destruction is yet another result of the misuse of science and research by the big powers. Without cooperation of certain scientists and scholars, we would not have witnessed production of different nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Are these weapons to protect global security?

What can a perpetual nuclear umbrella threat achieve for the sake of humanity? If nuclear war wages between nuclear powers, what human catastrophe will take place?

Today we can see the nuclear effects in even new generations of Nagasaki and Hiroshima residents, which might be witnessed in even the next generations to come.

Presently, the effects of the depleted uranium used in weapons since the beginning of the war in Iraq can be

examined and investigated accordingly.

These catastrophes take place only when scientists and scholars are misused by oppressors.

Another point of sorrow: Some big powers create a monopoly over science and prevent other nations in achieving scientific development as well.

This, too, is one of the surprises of our time. Some big powers do not want to see the progress of other societies and nations. They turn to thousands of reasons, make allegations, place economic sanctions to prevent other nations from developing and advancing, all resulting from their distance from human values and the teachings of the divine prophets.

Regretfully, they have not been trained to serve mankind.

Dear academics, dear faculty and scholars, students, I believe that the biggest God-given gift to man is science and knowledge. Man's search for knowledge and the truth through science is what it guarantees to do in getting close to God.

But science has to combine with the purity of the spirit and of the purity of man's spirit so that scholars can unveil the truth and then use that truth for advancing humanity's cause.

These scholars would be not only people who would guide humanity, but also guide humanity towards a better future.

And it is necessary that big powers should not allow mankind to engage in monopolistic activities and to prevent other nations from achieving that science. Science is a divine gift by God to everyone, and therefore, it must remain pure.

God is aware of all reality. All researchers and scholars are loved by God. So I hope there will be a day where these scholars and scientists will rule the world and God himself will arrive with Moses and Christ and Mohammed to rule the world and to take us toward justice.

I'd like to thank you now but refer to two points made in the introduction given about me, and then I will be open for any questions.

Last year -- I would say two years ago -- I raised two questions.

You know that my main job is a university instructor.

Right now, as president of Iran, I still continue teaching graduate and Ph.D.-level courses on a weekly basis. My students are working with me in scientific fields. I believe that I am an academic, myself. So I speak with you from an academic point of view, and I raised two questions.

But, instead of a response, I got a wave of insults and allegations against me. And regretfully, they came mostly from groups who claimed most to believe in the freedom of speech and the freedom of information. You know quite well that Palestine is an old wound, as old as 60 years. For 60 years, these people are displaced. For 60 years, these people are being killed. For 60 years, on a daily basis, there's conflict and terror. For 60 years, innocent women and children are destroyed and killed by helicopters and airplanes that break the house over their heads. For 60 years, children and kindergartens, in schools, in high schools, are in prison being tortured. For 60 years, security in the Middle East has been endangered. For 60 years, the slogan of expansionism from the Nile to the Euphrates is being chanted by certain groups in that part of the world.

And as an academic, I asked two questions; the same two questions that I will ask here again. And you judge, for yourselves, whether the response to these questions should be the insults, the allegations, and all the words and the negative propaganda or should we really try and face these two questions and respond to them? Like you, like any academic, I, too, will keep -- not yet become silent until I get the answer. So I'm awaiting logical answers instead of insults.

My first question was if -- given that the Holocaust is a present reality of our time, a history that occurred, why is there not sufficient research that can approach the topic from different perspectives?

Our friend referred to 1930 as the point of departure for this development. However, I believe the Holocaust from what we've read happened during World War II, after 1930, in the 1940s. So, you know, we have to really be able to trace the event.

My question was simple: There are researchers who want to approach the topic from a different perspective. Why are they put into prison? Right now, there are a number of European academics who have been sent to prison because they attempted to write about the Holocaust or research it from a different perspective, questioning certain aspects of it.

My question is: Why isn't it open to all forms of research? I have been told that there's been enough research on the topic. And I ask, well, when it comes to topics such as freedom, topics such as democracy, concepts and norms such as God, religion, physics even, or chemistry, there's been a lot of research, but we still continue more research on those topics. We encourage it.

But, then, why don't we encourage more research on a historical event that has become the root, the cause of many heavy catastrophes in the region in this time and age?

Why shouldn't there be more research about the root causes? That was my first question.

And my second question, well, given this historical event, if it is a reality, we need to still question whether the Palestinian people should be paying for it or not. After all, it happened in Europe. The Palestinian people had no role to play in it. So why is it that the Palestinian people are paying the price of an event they had nothing to do with?

The Palestinian people didn't commit any crime. They had no role to play in World War II. They were living with the Jewish communities and the Christian communities in peace at the time. They didn't have any problems.

And today, too, Jews, Christians and Muslims live in brotherhood all over the world in many parts of the world. They don't have any serious problems.

But why is it that the Palestinians should pay a price, innocent Palestinians, for 5 million people to remain displaced or refugees abroad for 60 years. Is this not a crime? Is asking about these crimes a crime by itself?

Why should an academic myself face insults when asking questions like this? Is this what you call freedom and upholding the freedom of thought?

And as for the second topic, Iran's nuclear issue, I know there is time limits, but I need time. I mean, a lot of time was taken from me.

We are a country, we are a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency. For over 33 years we are a member state of the agency.

The bylaw of the agency explicitly states that all member states have the right to the peaceful nuclear fuel technology. This is an explicit statement made in the bylaw, and the bylaw says that there is no pretext or excuse, even the inspections carried by the IAEA itself that can prevent member states' right to have that right.

Of course, the IAEA is responsible to carry out inspections. We are one of the countries that's carried out the most amount of level of cooperation with the IAEA. They have had hours and weeks and days of inspections in our country, and over and over again the agency's reports indicate that Iran's activities are peaceful, that they have not detected a deviation, and that Iran -- they have received positive cooperation from Iran.

But regrettably, two or three monopolistic powers, selfish powers want to force their word on the Iranian people and deny them their right.

They tell us you don't let them -- they won't let them inspect. Why not? Of course we do. How come is it, anyway, that you have that right and we can't have it? We want to have the right to peaceful nuclear energy. They tell us, don't make it yourself, we'll give it to you.

Well, in the past, I tell you, we had contracts with the U.S. government, with the British government, the French government, the German government, and the Canadian government on nuclear development for peaceful purposes. But unilaterally, each and every one of them canceled their contracts with us, as a result of which the

Iranian people had to pay a heavy cost in billions of dollars.

Why do we need the fuel from you? You've not even given us spare aircraft parts that we need for civilian aircraft for 28 years under the name of embargo and sanctions because we're against, for example, human rights or freedom? Under that pretext, you deny us that technology? We want to have the right to self-determination toward our future. We want to be independent. Don't interfere in us.

If you don't give us spare parts for civilian aircraft, what is the expectation that you'd give us fuel for nuclear development for peaceful purposes?

For 30 years, we've faced these problems for over \$5 billion to the Germans and then to the Russians, but we haven't gotten anything.

And the words have not been completed.

It is our right. We want our right. And we don't want anything beyond the law, nothing less than international law.

We are a peaceful, loving nation. We love all nations.

At the end of President Ahmadinejad's speech, he responded to questions posed by some students.

MODERATOR: Mr. President, your statements here today and in the past have provoked many questions which I would like to pose to you on behalf of the students and faculty who have submitted them to me.

Let me begin with the question to which you just alluded.

The first question is: Do you or your government seek the destruction of the state of Israel as a Jewish state?

AHMADINEJAD: We love all nations. We are friends with the Jewish people. There are many Jews in Iran, leaving peacefully, with security.

You must understand that in our constitution and our laws and in the parliamentary elections for every 150,000 people, we get one representative in the parliament. For the Jewish community, for one-fifth of this number, they still get one independent representative in the parliament.

So our proposal to the Palestinian plight is a humanitarian and democratic proposal. What we say is that to solve this 60-year problem, we must allow the Palestinian people to decide about its future for itself.

This is compatible with the spirit of the Charter of the United Nations and the fundamental principles enshrined in it. We must allow Jewish Palestinians, Muslim Palestinians and Christian Palestinians to determine their own fate themselves through a free referendum.

Whatever they choose as a nation, everybody should accept and respect. Nobody should interfere in the affairs of the Palestinian nation. Nobody should sow the seeds of discord. Nobody should spend tens of billions of dollars equipping and arming one group there.

We say allow the Palestinian nation to decide its own future, to have the right to self-determination for itself. This is what we are saying as the Iranian nation.

MODERATOR: Mr. President, I think many members of our audience would like to hear a clearer answer to that question. The question is:

Do you or your government seek the destruction of the state of Israel as a Jewish state? And I think you could answer that question with a single word, either yes or no.

AHMADINEJAD: You asked the question, and then you want the answer the way you want to hear it. Well, this isn't really a free flow of information.

I'm just telling you what my position is. I'm asking you: Is the Palestinian issue not an international issue of prominence or not? Please tell me, yes or no? There's the plight of a people.

MODERATOR: The answer to your question is yes.

AHMADINEJAD: Well, thank you for your cooperation . We recognize there's a problem there that's been going on for 60 years. Everybody provides a solution. And our solution is a free referendum.

Let this referendum happen, and then you'll see what the results are.

Let the people of Palestine freely choose what they want for their future. And then what you want in your mind to happen there will happen and will be realized.

QUESTION: (OFF-MIKE) second question, which was posed by President Bollinger earlier and comes from a number of other students:

Why is your government providing aid to terrorists? Will you stop doing so and permit international monitoring to certify that you have stopped?

AHMADINEJAD: Well, I want to pose a question here to you. If someone comes and explodes bombs around you, threatens your president, members of the administration, kills the members of the Senate or Congress, how would you treat them?

Would you reward them, or would you name them a terrorist group? Well, it's clear. You would call them a terrorist.

My dear friends, the Iranian nation is a victim of terrorism. For --26 years ago, where I worked, close to where I worked, in a terrorist operation, the elected president of the Iranian nation and the elected prime minister of Iran lost their lives in a bomb explosion. They turned into ashes.

A month later, in another terrorist operation, 72 members of our parliament and highest-ranking officials, including four ministers and eight deputy ministers' bodies were shattered into pieces as a result of terrorist attacks.

Within six months, over 4,000 Iranians lost their lives, assassinated by terrorist groups. All this carried out by the hand of one single terrorist group. Regretfully, that same terrorist group now, today, in your country, is being -- operating under the support of the U.S.

administration, working freely, distributing declarations freely, and their camps in Iraq are supported by the U.S. government.

They're secured by the U.S. government. Our nation has been harmed by terrorist activities. We were the first nation that objected to terrorism and the first to uphold the need to fight terrorism.

We need to address the root causes of terrorism and eradicate those root causes. We live in the Middle East.

For us, it's quite clear which powers, sort of, incite terrorists, support them, fund them. We know that. Our nation, the Iranian nation, through history has always extended a hand of friendship to other nations. We're a cultured nation. We don't need to resort to terrorism. We've been victims of terrorism, ourselves. And it's regrettable that people who argue they're fighting terrorism, instead of supporting the Iranian people and nation, instead of fighting the terrorists that are attacking them, they're supporting the terrorists and then turn the fingers to us. This is most regrettable.

QUESTION: Mr. President, a further set of questions challenged your view of the Holocaust. Since the evidence that this occurred in Europe in the 1940s, as a result of the actions of the German Nazi government, since that -- those facts -- are well documented, why are you calling for additional research? There seems to be no purpose in doing so, other than to question whether the Holocaust actually occurred as a historical fact. Can you explain why you believe more research is needed into the facts of what are what are incontrovertible?

AHMADINEJAD: Thank you very much for your question. I am an academic, and you are as well. Can you argue that researching a phenomenon is finished, forever done? Can we close the books for good on a historical event?

There are different perspectives that come to light after every research is done. Why should we stop research at all? Why should we stop the progress of science and knowledge?

You shouldn't ask me why I'm asking questions. You should ask yourselves why you think that that's questionable?

Why do you want to stop the progress of science and research?

Do you ever take what's known as absolute in physics? We had principles in mathematics that were granted to be absolute in mathematics for over 800 years. But new science has gotten rid of those absolutisms, come forward other different logics of looking at mathematics and sort of turned the way we look at it as a science altogether after 800 years.

So, we must allow researchers, scholars, they investigate into everything, every phenomenon -- God, universe, human beings, history and civilization. Why should we stop that?

I am not saying that it didn't happen at all. This is not that judgment that I am passing here. I said, in my second question, granted this happened, what does it have to do with the Palestinian people?

This is a serious question. There are two dimensions. In the first question.

QUESTION: Let me just -- let me pursue this a bit further. It is difficult to have a scientific discussion if there isn't at least some basis, some empirical basis, some agreement about what the facts are.

So calling for research into the facts when the facts are so well established represents for many a challenging of the facts themselves and a denial that something terrible occurred in Europe in those years.

Let me move on to ... AHMADINEJAD: Allow me. After all, you are free to interpret what you want from what I say. But what I am saying I'm saying with full clarity.

In the first question I'm trying to actually uphold the rights of European scholars. In the field of science and research I'm asking, there is nothing known as absolute. There is nothing sufficiently done Not in physics for certain. There has been more research on physics than it has on the Holocaust, but we still continue to do research on physics. There is nothing wrong with doing it.

This is what man wants. They want to approach a topic from different points of view. Scientists want to do that. Especially an issue that has become the foundation of so many other political developments that have unfolded in the Middle East in the past 60 years.

Why do we stop it altogether? You have to have a justified reason for it. The fact that it was researched sufficiently in the past is not a sufficient justification in my mind.

QUESTION: Mr. President, another student asks -- Iranian women are now denied basic human rights and your government has imposed draconian punishments, including execution on Iranian citizens who are homosexuals. Why are you doing those things?

AHMADINEJAD: Freedoms in Iran are genuine, true freedoms. Iranian people are free. Women in Iran enjoy the highest levels of freedom. We have two vice presidents that are female, at the highest levels of specialty, specialized fields. In our parliament and our government and our universities, they're present. In our biotechnological fields, our technological fields, there are hundreds of women scientists that are active -- in the political realm as well.

It's not -- it's wrong for some governments, when they disagree with another government, to, sort of, try to spread lies that distort the full truth.

Our nation is free. It has the highest level of participation in elections, in Iran. Eighty percent, ninety percent of the people turn out for votes during the elections, half of which, over half of which are women. So how can we say that women are not free? Is that the entire truth?

But as for the executions, I'd like to raise two questions. If someone comes and establishes a network for illicit drug trafficking that affects the youth in Iran, Turkey, Europe, the United States, by introducing these illicit drugs and destroys them, would you ever reward them?

People who cause the deterioration of the lives of hundreds of millions of youth around the world, including in Iran, can we have any sympathy to them? Don't you have capital punishment in the United States? You do, too.

In Iran, too, there's capital punishment for illicit drug traffickers, for people who violated the rights of people. If somebody takes up a gun, goes into a house, kills a group of people there, and then tries to take ransom, how

would you confront them in Iran -- or in the United States? Would you reward them? Can a physician allow microbes, symbolically speaking, to spread across a nation? We have laws. People who violate the public rights of the people by using guns, killing people, creating insecurity, sells drugs, distribute drugs at a high level are sentenced to execution in Iran.

And some of these punishments, very few, are carried in the public eye , before the public eye. It's a law, based on democratic principles.

You use injections and microbes to kill these people, and they' re executed or they're hung. But the end result is killing.

QUESTION: Mr. President, the question isn't about criminal and drug smugglers. The question was about sexual preference and women.

AHMADINEJAD: In Iran, we don't have homosexuals, like in your country. We don't have that in our country. In Iran, we do not have this phenomenon. I don't know who's told you that we have it.

But, as for women, maybe you think that being a woman is a crime. It's not a crime to be a woman. Women are the best creatures created by God. They represent the kindness, the beauty that God instills in them. Women are respected in Iran. In Iran, every family who is given a girl, they are 10 times happier than having a son. Women are respected more than men are.

They are exempt from many responsibilities. Many of the legal responsibilities rest on the shoulders of men in our society because of the respect, culturally given, to women, to the future mothers. In Iranian culture, men and sons and girls constantly kiss the hands of their mothers as a sign of respect, respect for women. And we are proud of this culture.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I have two questions which I'll put together. One is, what did you hope to accomplish by speaking at Columbia today? And the second is, what would you have said if you were permitted to visit the site of the September 11th tragedy?

AHMADINEJAD: Well, here, I'm your guest. I've been invited by Columbia, an official invitation given for me to come here. But I do want to say something here.

In Iran, when you invite a guest, you respect them. This is our tradition, required by our culture. And I know that American people have that culture, as well. Last year, I wanted to go to the site of the September 11th tragedy to show respect to the victims of the tragedy, to show my sympathy with their families.

But our plans got overextended. We were involved in negotiations and meetings until midnight. And they said it would be very difficult to go visit the site at that late hour of the night. So, I told my friends then that they need to plan this for the following year so that I can go and visit the site and to show my respects.

Regretfully, some groups had very strong reactions, very bad reactions. It's bad for someone to prevent someone to show sympathy to the families of the victims of the September 11 event -- tragic event.

This is a respect from my side. Somebody told me this is an insult. I said, "What are you saying? This is my way of showing my respect. Why would you think that?" Thinking like that, how do you expect to manage the world and world affairs?

Don't you think that a lot of problems in the world come from the way you look at issues because of this kind of way of thinking, because of this sort of pessimistic approach toward a lot of people, because of a certain level of selfishness, self-absorption that needs to be put aside so that we can show respect to everyone, to allow an environment for friendship to grow, to allow all nations to talk with one another and move toward peace?

What was the second question?

I wanted to speak with the press. The September 11th tragic event was a huge event. It led to a lot of many other events afterwards.

After 9 /11 Afghanistan was occupied, and then Iraq was occupied. And for six years in our region there is insecurity, terror and fear.

If the root causes of 9/11 are examined properly -- why it was happened, what caused it, what were the conditions that led to it, who truly was involved, who was really involved -- and put it all together to understand how to prevent the crisis in Iraq, fix the problem in Afghanistan and Iraq combined.

QUESTION: Mr. President, a number of questions have asked about your nuclear program. Why is your government seeking to acquire enriched uranium suitable for nuclear weapons? Will you stop doing so?

AHMADINEJAD : Our nuclear program, first and foremost, operates within the framework of law. And, second, under the inspections of the IAEA. And, thirdly, they are completely peaceful.

The technology we have is for enrichment below the level of 5 percent level. And any level below 5 percent is solely for providing fuel to power plants. Repeated reports by the IAEA explicitly say that there is no indication that Iran has deviated from the peaceful path of its nuclear program.

We are all well aware that Iran's nuclear issue is a political issue. It's not a legal issue. The international atomic energy agency has verified that our activities are for peaceful purposes.

But there are two or three powers that think that they have the right to monopolize all science and knowledge. And they expect the Iranian people, the Iranian nation, to turn to others to get fuel, to get science, to get knowledge that's indigenous to itself, to humble itself. And then they would, of course, refrain from giving it to us, too. So we're quite clear what we need.

If you have created the fifth generation of atomic bombs and are testing them already, what position are you in to question the peaceful purposes of other people who want nuclear power?

We do not believe in nuclear weapons, period. It goes against the whole grain of humanity. So let me just joke -- try to tell a joke here. I think the politicians who are after atomic bombs or are testing them, making them, politically, they are backward, retarded.

QUESTION: Mr. President, a final question. I know your time is short and that you need to move on. Is Iran prepared to open broad discussions with the government of the United States? What would Iran hope to achieve in such discussions? How do you see, in the future, a resolution of the points of conflict between the government of the United States and the government of Iran ?

AHMADINEJAD: From the start, we announced that we are ready to negotiate with all countries. Since 28 years ago, when our revolution succeeded and we established, we took freedom and democracy that was held at by a pro-Western dictatorship. We announced our readiness that besides two countries, we are ready to have friendly relations and talks with all countries of the world.

One of those two was the apartheid regime of South Africa, which has been eliminated. And the second was the Zionist regime. For everybody else around the world, we announced that we want to have friendly, brotherly ties. The Iranian nation is a cultured nation. It is a civilized nation. It seeks -- it wants talks and negotiations.

It's for it.

We believe that in negotiations and talks, everything can be resolved very easily. We don't need threats. We don't need to point bombs or guns. We don't need to get into conflicts if we talk. We have a clear logic about that.

We question the way the world is being run and managed today. We believe that it will not lead to viable peace and security for the world, the way it's run today. We have solutions based on humane values and for relations among states. With the U.S. government, too, we will negotiate -- we don't have any issues about that -- under fair, just circumstances with mutual respect on both sides.

You saw that in order to help the security of Iraq, we had three rounds of talks with the United States, and last year, before coming to New York, I announced that I am ready in the United Nations to engage in a debate with Mr. Bush, the president of the United States, about critical international issues.

So that shows that we want to talk. Having a debate before the all the audience, so the truth is revealed, so that misunderstandings and misperceptions are removed, so that we can find a clear path for brotherly and friendly relations.

I think that if the U.S. administration, if the U.S. government puts aside some of its old behaviors, it can actually be a good friend for the Iranian people, for the Iranian nation.

For 28 years, they've consistently threatened us, insulted us, prevented our scientific development, every day, under one pretext or another.

You all know Saddam, the dictator, was supported by the government of the United States and some European countries in attacking Iran.

And he carried out an eight-year war, a criminal war. Over 200,000 Iranians lost their lives. Over 600,000 Iranians were hurt as a result of the war.

He used chemical weapons. Thousands of Iranians were victims of chemical weapons that he used against us.

Today, Mr. Nobaveh, who is a reporter, an official reporter, international reporter, who was covering U.N. reports in the U.N. for many years, he is one of the victims of the chemical weapons used by Iraq against us.

And since then, we've been under different propaganda, sort of embargoes, economic sanctions, political sanctions. Why? Because we got rid of a dictator? Because we wanted the freedom and democracy that we got for ourselves? That, we can't understand.

We think that if the U.S. government recognizes the rights of the Iranian people, respects all nations and extends a hand of friendship with all Iranians, they, too, will see that Iranians will be one of its best friends.

Would you allow me to thank the audience a moment?

Well, there are many things that I would have liked to cover, but I don't want to take your time any further. I was asked: Would I allow the faculty at Columbia and students here to come to Iran? From this platform, I invite Columbia faculty members and students to come and visit Iran, to speak with our university students. You're officially invited.

University faculty and students that the university decides, or the student associations choose and select are welcome to come. You're welcome to visit any university that you choose inside Iran. We'll provide you with the list of the universities. There are over 400 universities in our country. And you can choose whichever you want to go and visit. We'll give you the platform. We'll respect you 100 percent. We will have our students sit there and listen to you, speak with you, hear what you have to say.

Right now in our universities on a daily basis there are hundreds of meetings like this. They hear, they talk, they ask questions. They welcome it.

In the end I'd like to thank Columbia University. I had heard that many politicians in the United States are trained in Columbia University. And there are many people here who believe in the freedom of speech, in clear, frank conversations.

I do like to extend my gratitude to the managers here in the United States -- at Columbia University, I apologize -- the people who so well organized this meeting today.

I'd like to extend my deepest gratitude to the faculty members and the students here. I ask Almighty God to assist all of us to move hand in hand to establish peace and future filled with friendship and justice and brotherhood.

Best of luck to all of you.

MODERATOR: I'm sorry that President Ahmadinejad's schedule makes it necessary for him to leave before he's been able to answer many of the questions that we have, or even answer some of the ones that we posed to him.

But I think we can all be pleased that his appearance here demonstrates Columbia's deep commitment to free expression and debate.

I want to thank you all for coming to participate. --IRNA