

Remarks by Eng Ayman Abdel Wahab Managing Director Special Olympics Middles East/North Africa
2010 Global Congress Opening Session
7 June 2010

HRH, Dr. Timothy Shriver, Ministers, Ambassadors, SOI Board of Directors, Programs Leaders, Our Great Athletes, Colleagues and Friends,

I would like to extend my thanks to the generosity of **His Majesty King Mohammad VI** and the leadership & passion of **Her Royal Highness Princess Lalla Amina**. We have the opportunity today to unite program leaders, athlete leaders, and friends of Special Olympics together in one place to discuss the future of our movement.

The 2010 Special Olympics Global Congress is the pivotal event for Special Olympics leaders at all levels. More than 600 leaders from 180 nations - CEOs, Board Chairs, Celebrities, Sponsors, International Board members and others – are coming together to set the direction for the future of the Special Olympics movement founded by Mrs. Eunice Kennedy Shriver 42 years ago. Here we will build more motivation, insight and tools to amplify the movement in this new decade. Actually, it is the second of its kind as the first one was held in the Hague, Netherlands back in 2000. But, it is the first in a decade and more specific in the history to be hosted by one of the Middle East North Africa region countries “Morocco”. Morocco is always able to bring together people of all types of background, race, politics, education level, social status, and religion. That is exactly what Special Olympics is all about.

Special Olympics MENA is indeed fortunate to have a long and collaborative leadership since 1997 when the first ever RAC was established under the leadership of both HRH Prince Ra’ad Bin Zeid and Dr. Ismail Osman who are with us here today. We had built upon with their vision and hope that we will continue in the months and years ahead working jointly with HE Sheikh Dajj Al Khalifa and all of our distinguished RAC members.

We are here also to share stories with each other, to learn from each other. Allow me to share some of my personal story and that of our great MENA region:

I had the honor of being nominated back in August 1998 by the Special Olympics Egypt board of directors as the National Director of Special Olympics Egypt. The program result an increase in the number of registered Special Olympics athletes in Egypt from 2,000 to more than 15,000 at the end of the year 2000 representing three times the expected goal number by Special Olympics International. More personally here, my aunt Magda Moussa dedication was my role model to the Special Olympics world since I joined and that motivated me to accept the position when I was nominated by Special Olympics International as the Regional Managing Director for the MENA region in Jan 2001 in spite of being a Telecommunications & Electronics Engineer. I recall that without her dedication to social and educational justice, Special Olympics in Egypt & may be in the entire region and lives of regional individuals with intellectual disability would not be what it is today. I learned how to be born to poverty and compassionate advocate for those who are vulnerable and that was the main reason for me to accept the nomination.

In February 1999 Special Olympics Egypt organized the first ever Special Olympics MENA Regional Games under Mrs. Suzanne Mubarak's patronage. 206 athletes from 13 countries participated in three sports. Since that time the MENA region is the only one throughout the movement holding the Regional Games every two years. In 2010 the 7th Regional Games with the participation of 2,000 athletes representing all 23 Special Olympics Middle / North Africa Programs including the newly 2009 established three programs (Somalia, Djibouti and Comoro Islands) will be held in Damascus, Syria from 25 Sept till 2 Oct, 2010 under the auspices of H.E. Mrs. Asmaa Al Assad, Syria' First Lady and Honorary Chairperson of SO Syria along with the 5th Athletes Leadership Congress, 5th Healthy Athletes Screenings , 4th Families Forum and 5th Youth Summit and we are so happy to have with us today H.E. Mrs. Diala Haj Aref, Syrian Minister of Social Affairs & Labor and SO Syria Chairperson.

The number of athletes in the region in Dec 2000 was 20,428 athletes in 20 countries. 15,000 athletes out of the 20,428 were from Egypt (75%). Regardless of the continued challenges persist in the region with the on-going war in Iraq and instability for several other programs. According to the last 2009 Global Censes, the MENA region no. of athletes is 125,000 in 23 countries. 25,000 out of which are from Egypt (20%). The region participated in all Winter & Summer Games since 2001. Four countries participated in the 2001 7th World Winter Games in Alaska, USA. In the 2009 9th World Winter Games in Idaho, USA, seventeen countries participated

Following the Egyptian role model with Mrs. Suzanne Mubarak as the leader, we were able to bring issues related to intellectual disabilities to the forefront with the regional leaders and dignitaries; His Majesty King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, Her Majesty Queen Rania Al-Abdullah, HH Sheikh Mohamed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, HH Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, HE President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, HE President Zine Elabidine Ben Ali, HRH Sheikh Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa, HRH Princess Lalla Amina, HE Mrs Wafaa Soliman, HE Mrs Asma Al Assad, HH Sheikh Hamed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, HRH Prince Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, HRH Prince Sultan Bin Fahd Al Saud, HRH Prince Al Waleed Bin Talal Al Saud, HRH Prince Nawaf Bin Faisal Al Saud, HE Mr. Amr Moussa, HRH Prince Sultan Bin Salman Al Saud, HH Sheikha Sheikha Al Sabah, HE Dr. Mohamed Muaamar Al Qadafi and many others.

Dear Leaders,

Your presence mean a great deal to all the athletes, their families and all of us in the region, and significantly boost our vision of a changed world – a world of common acceptance, inclusion, and joyful celebration of the human potential that resides in the region's 15 million people with intellectual disabilities. All of your incredible energy and commitment is a real tribute to our athletes and their ability to unite us all.

It is our hope that our vision of acceptance will stem from Morocco and take root in all nations throughout the world.