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Press Release

Forward Planning

ISLAM AWARENESS WEEK LAUNCHES A VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Take a slice of lemon, a little bit of sugar and hope you don't need an operation! Relax and strum a catchy tune on your guitar. Or open a paperback book and learn how much Britain benefited from Muslims in history. Lemon, sugar, medical and musical instruments and paper are all things first introduced to Britons by Muslims. Britain's Muslim heritage is the theme of this year's Islam Awareness Week. It begins with the public launch of a website specially designed to support schools in providing multicultural education.

The project, called The Virtual Classroom, will be launched by Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for Education and Skills on Monday November 3rd, 10am-12pm from the House of Commons. Designed and maintained by British Muslim educators and academics, it is freely available and intended as an interactive, collaborative venture between schools and the Muslim community.

Using the latest techniques of information technology the virtual classroom is

offered to schools across Britain as a new resource to fill a gap in conventional history books.

"Actually the very science that makes computers possible relies on advances in mathematics first pioneered by Muslims. British children should know this," said Sher Khan, national organiser of Islam Awareness Week.

"Many areas of modern science and technology would be impossible without the pioneering work of Muslim scholars. And things like universities, publicly funded hospitals, public libraries, provision for life long learning as well as foods, spices and clothing we take for granted, even cashing a check, were first developed by Muslims then borrowed and incorporated into European society. It's a side of history too often neglected. We want British children to learn of the positive relations, the constructive contribution Islam and Muslims have made to British life. It's the best antidote to all the negative associations they get from the news and from the history books," said Sher Khan.

The website will continue to be developed. It is hoped it will grow not only through the work of the design team but also through contributions from teachers and pupils around Britain. Its aim is to provide new resources, new support material that otherwise would be difficult for teachers to access. It includes lesson plans as well as games.

"This virtual classroom is a long term undertaking. It's a new kind of initiative, it shows the Muslim community's commitment to education, to making multiculturalism positive, constructive and inclusive. It's British Muslims living up to the very best of their history, trying to live out the teaching of their religion in a creative way for the benefit of Britain today," said Sher Khan.

"Schools are the building blocks of Britain's future. If we want better mutual understanding and respect between communities then we have ensure education has the resources and materials to give a more rounded picture, one that reflects the history of all Britain's communities. And there is a positive story buried there, a story about sharing the best of human achievements; it's

a lesson we all need to relearn to make Britain the best possible country for everyone non-Muslim and Muslim alike.

"We hope by recapturing the important aspects of this real lesson of sharing we can spark the imagination of British children. In this virtual classroom we want them to learn a globalised world interconnected by trade sharing the achievements of many peoples and cultures is nothing new. Today's challenge is to make that world more peaceful, more cooperative, a fairer and more just place for everyone. We can only overcome today's troubles and the problems we inherit from history by showing there is another way. We want children to learn they can gain from each other's culture and history and inspire them to be as creative as the great minds of the past were in their day.

"We hope the website will encourage young people to learn more about each other. We hope it will encourage parents and community groups to actively support schools. It's a model we hope will start a trend among various ethnic communities. There's a wealth of knowledge and expertise in our community that can enhance Britain and fit it to succeed in a globalised world. We want to set a constructive example and set that knowledge to work to improve community relations, create new opportunities to help Britain prosper in the future."

Islam Awareness Week is an annual event now in its ninth year. During the week there will be a host of activities in communities across Britain dealing with the theme of Muslim heritage. Again this year Islam Awareness Week falls during the fasting month of Ramadan. Muslim groups will be sharing this religious duty in a national day of fasting to raise money for international, national and local charities by inviting their non-Muslim friends and neighbours to join them for a day forgoing food and drink to remember those in need.

Full details of the launch of The Virtual Classroom and events of Islam Awareness Week are available from the press office. See the attached sheet for further details of the new website and the launch.

The Press Office will be happy to assist in developing local angles and putting you in touch with local groups and schools participating in the project or any inquiries about covering these events.

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Notes to Editors

1. For Media enquiries please contact the Press Officer on 07005 947 199, email: press@iaw.org.uk or email: admin@iaw.org.uk. (Alternative contact number: 07092359611).
2. The education website: www.thevirtualclassroom.net will be available on 3rd November 2003
3. Islam Awareness Week runs from 3rd-9th November this year.
4. Islam Awareness Week is a project of The Islamic Society of Britain (ISB), which is affiliated to the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB).
5. For further details please visit the IAW website: www.iaw.org.uk

THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Call up the website, publicly available on November 3rd, and you find a classroom. Navigate around the classroom and click on various items to be guided to text boxes telling how the objects link to the achievements of Muslim history and then became part of the making of modern Britain.

Did you know that any English dictionary is alive with words borrowed from Arabic? There are estimated to be some 10,000 such words. And there are even more if you take in Persian, Turkish and Malay among other languages of Muslim peoples. Each word records ideas, goods and services Britain acquired from Muslim civilization. The words range from oranges and lemons

to cotton; from alcoves and admirals, to azimuths and zero, chemistry and algebra and even alcohol.

The First Aid box, a necessary in any classroom leads to the Muslim contribution to modern medicine. From measles and smallpox to devising the set of surgical instruments that would be familiar even to today's surgeons – the basic tool for removing tonsils was developed by Al Zahrawi, a 10th century Muslim surgeon and it has hardly changed since he first devised it and published his idea with illustrations.

Any schoolchild needs a lunchbox and chances are when they open it they'll find some item that came into Britain thanks to the great agricultural revolution pioneered by Muslim civilization. Bananas – Britain's favourite fruit and staple of school lunchpacks - lemons, melons, sugar cane, rice, apricots, dates, spinach, aubergines and durum wheat. We eat them all, and they are all part agricultural staples developed and popularised across the Muslim World before entering Europe through Muslim Spain. And then there's the spices. You can't have a chicken tikka masala – allegedly Britain's favourite dish - without them. Spices came to Britain as part of the great global trading world with Muslim civilization at its centre.

Or what about what children wear: cotton T-shirts, silk pyjamas, jumpers. The fabrics and the words to describe them all come from Muslim enterprise. Muslin is named after Mosul in Iraq, damask after Damascus in Syria. In olden time fustian was named for Fustat the Muslim capital of Egypt before the founding of Cairo.

Most stringed instruments including the guitar without which there would be no pop music were developed by Muslim civilization. And there was hardly a great scholar of the Golden Age of Muslim civilization who did not write about music.

The virtual classroom includes references to some of the greatest Muslim scholars and their contributions to chemistry, optics and of course

mathematics. These were experimental scientists who made advances that are the basis to modern science. The books they wrote, and the paper they wrote on, passed into Europe and made its achievements possible.

The website also explains how publicly funded hospitals as we understand them today were first established and spread across the Muslim world. The very first was founded in Baghdad in 809 AD! A teaching hospital where clinical practice and pharmacology were studied, treatments devised and care made available to anyone who needed it Muslim or non-Muslim.

There's lots more in the virtual classroom – from hygiene and cosmetics to compasses and navigation; from agriculture and botany to optics and astronomy. The great lesson is that ideas and ways of thinking Europe takes as its history are a joint heritage it shares with Muslim Britons.

The virtual classroom has been set up because most British people are more familiar with the history of conflict and tension between Europe and the Muslim World than the positive connections it share and that made life better for everyone. It's the constructive story that doesn't make it into history books used in schools. But it's the kind of thing children who live in an increasingly globalised world need to know about the history of their classmates and fellow citizens.

The virtual classroom will be officially launched and then available to anyone on the worldwide web by Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for Education and Skills. Also at the official launch will be a representative of HRH Prince Charles and Trevor Phillips, head of the Commission for Racial Equality. Representatives of the Liberal Democrats and Conservative Party will also attend.

The launch will take place 10am-12pm from the House of Commons on 3rd November, actual room: TBA.

The Islam Awareness Week team can provide you with more background and

detail about the launch and the website. We can also supply supporting visual material. They can also give you details about the plans for future development of the project.

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