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ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

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**ADDRESS TO THE OSCE
HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE
on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination**

*Astana
29-30 June 2010*

His Excellency Mr. Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan

His Excellency Minister Kanat Saudabayev, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan

His Excellency Mr Mevlut Çavusoglu, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

- I should like to start by expressing my heartfelt thanks for the generous hospitality extended to me by our hosts as well as for the kind invitation by Minister Kanat Saudabayev, Chairperson-in-office of the OSCE to address this distinguished audience.

- Furthermore, allow me to say how pleased I am to be visiting this country for the very first time and having the opportunity to develop closer ties with Kazakhstan, a member of the group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations that, in my view, can play a pivotal role in this region.

Excellencies

- A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to address the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna. At that time I expressed my expectation that the working relations between the UN Alliance of Civilizations and the OSCE will live up to the best of our own capabilities, building on our mutual complementarities and synergies.
- I am here today to make a step further.
- The topical issue of non-discrimination and tolerance that you are going to address here during these two days are at the core of the Alliance's UN initiative.
- You might remember that in 2001 we celebrated the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, precisely to underline tolerance and respect for diversity and the need to seek common ground among and within civilizations in order to address common challenges that threaten shared values, universal human rights and the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, through cooperation, partnership and inclusion.
- Now it is crystal clear that these goals cannot be met in one year celebrations and this is the reason why, in my view, the idea of an

Alliance of Civilizations as a permanent UN Forum is generating such far-reaching interest together with the occasional reservations.

- The interest lies in the fact that what is at stake after all is the aspiration of the peoples of the world to dignity, justice, equality of opportunities and enjoyment of their human rights.
- And also because we live in one world where more than ever we need to understand and respect each other. Because conflicts anywhere are conflicts everywhere. Because human, economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. Because peace is for everybody and anybody.
- The Alliance generates great interest, as I said earlier, but also reservations on occasion. Reservations and even suspicion. In my view, reservations are normal in international life and my role as the High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations is precisely to give further explanations, to clarify, to reinforce trust. Suspicions are often based on prejudice and distorted views which tend to fuel mistrust and hostility. With resolve, patience and strong public diplomacy we can hopefully gain hearts and minds.

- Let me put it bluntly: the Alliance is not a zero sum game. It has goals to be achieved, it follows a strategy and priorities to be implemented.
- Of course it is an entirely voluntary programme of action but only freedom gives the sense of responsibility and only engaged ownership can bring lasting results.
- This is why the Alliance of Civilizations is first and foremost an inclusive platform for dialogue and cooperation aimed at improving understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures and religions and, in the process, to help counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism.

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- Further to the UN acquis on human rights and fundamental freedoms, the list of commitments of the OSCE participating States in the specific area of tolerance and non-discrimination is quite impressive.
- I understand that this meeting here in Astana will mainly focus on assessment of the implementation of these commitments, including the most recent decisions on hate crime, made in Athens in 2009.

- Let me assure you that the Alliance of Civilizations is ready to cooperate with you with a view to fully implementing your commitments at local, national and regional level.

- As you may remember, we invited our State members to develop National Plans and Regional Strategies for Intercultural Dialogue covering the four main fields of action of the Alliance, which are education, youth, media and migration.

- I will be more than happy to be given a number of recommendations for action to be implemented within these four areas that we could recommend that our members include in the National Plans or in the Regional Strategies as common or priority actions.

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- From the perspective of the Alliance of Civilizations diversity, whether ethnic, cultural or religious is a basic human “asset for the advancement and welfare of humanity at large and should be valued, enjoyed, genuinely accepted and embraced as a permanent feature which enriches our societies (Durban Declaration, 2001)”, and in my view firmly protected when necessary.

- Cultural diversity in a broad sense is one of the four dimensions of sustainable development. But it is also the very expression of the human condition.
- Therefore diversity is to be preserved as a common heritage of humanity and as a source of innovation and progress.
- Cultural diversity is a driving force of development, not only in respect of economic growth, but also to create thriving and vibrant societies leading a more fulfilling intellectual, artistic, emotional, moral and spiritual life.
- There are several theories as to what we as humans all have in common constituting one human family in spite of our diversity as individuals and peoples.
- But human rights and fundamental freedoms as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights intend precisely to express our commonalities beyond our infinite diversity as individuals.
- Universality of Human rights and cultural diversity reinforce each other when seen as complementary dimensions of inclusive societies whereas they become disruptive forces and undermine social cohesion when seen as contradictory.

- Reinforcement of human rights can but benefit respect for diversity, preservation of pluralism and tolerance.

- However, to build inclusive and cohesive societies we need to find the right balance between the rights of cultural communities and the need to maintain social cohesion respecting the principles of human rights that bind together all countries worldwide.

- Now the point is that in times of intercultural tensions, it is important not only to uphold universal values and the rights of minorities, to protect the right to be free from discriminations, but also to develop appropriate policies to foster public tolerance, which depends heavily on education.

- As Kofi Annan put it in 2004, “there is a need to unlearn the habit of xenophobia. Fear of the “other” is so widespread and ferocious that we may be tempted to think of it as an immutable attribute of the human animal. But people are not hard-wired for prejudice. In some cases, they are taught to hate. In others, they are manipulated into it by leaders who exploit fear, ignorance or feelings of weakness”.

- So he strongly recommends engaging in a process of unlearning – unlearning the stereotypes about the “other” or “the others” that have become so entrenched in so many minds and so much of the media that it often involves the demonization and discrimination of an entire group on the basis of its colour, sex, language, religion, political, national or social origin; unlearning the habit of xenophobia; unlearning intolerance.

- No one ignores the importance that “religion, spirituality and belief play a central role in the lives of millions of women and men, and in the way they live and treat other persons” (Durban Declaration).

- But neither do we ignore the escalating religious intolerance of recent years due to various reasons, expressed in an array of forms and fuelling a high proportion of the situations of armed conflict around the world.

- Naturally, addressing discrimination and intolerance based on religion - confronting anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and Christianophobia - is in part a matter of legal protection because what is at stake is the right to freedom of religion and freedom from discrimination based on religion.

- But there is more than that. Laws and norms are just a starting point. We need a wider strategy focused on education. Education about all religions and beliefs so that myths and misconceptions can be seen for what they are.
- We also need to invest more in media literacy as a two way process involving those who produce and those who use media contents. We must prevent the media and the internet from being used to spread hatred, while of course safeguarding freedom of opinion and expression.

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- In the pre-day of the 3rd Global Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations', hold in Rio de Janeiro, at the end of May, a round table on "Addressing Islamophobia: Building on unused opportunities for mutual respect and inclusion", was organized at the initial request of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, together with the Council of Europe and the British Council.
- Its main purpose was to hold an informed debate on how to address Islamophobia from a results-oriented perspective, based on available data on discrimination and prejudice toward Muslim communities in various countries.

- The debate was too short to agree on concrete recommendations. So we need to continue to concert efforts in order address this issue and avoid it feeding fears and creating victimization on both sides.
- It is not as easy a debate as we might like it to be. But that is all the more reason to unite efforts and try harder.
- Some people saw our round-table initiative as adding to current polarizations. Others pointed out the need to keep the debate wider and avoid focusing on specific forms of discrimination based on religion. Some other voices stressed instead that confronting Christianophobia or addressing the situation of Christians in the Middle East for instance were two much higher priorities.
- I took good note of these reactions. I like to receive feed-back regardless of whether or not I agree or disagree with the arguments behind it.
- I do believe however that
 - 1: all forms of religious discrimination and intolerance are unacceptable and have to be confronted;
 - 2: the debate can take place both in general and specific terms;

- 3: whether existing legal instruments on freedom of thought, conscience and religion are capable of meeting the new ongoing challenges remains to be appreciated;
 - 4: beyond the legal aspects there is a broader key issue of education;
 - 5: The UN Alliance of Civilizations is not a jurisdictional or regulatory body to issue legal opinions on religious violations;
 - 6: rather it has the duty to promote concrete actions as a results oriented UN initiative aimed at improving understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures and religions and, in the process, helping to counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism.
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- This is why I am eager to hear about the conclusions of your working sessions. I am eager to bring on board our partners so that together we can achieve strong leadership to develop an honest approach to tolerance and non-discrimination and where necessary act against common threats such as terrorism.

 - Many thanks