

**United Nations special event to mark
the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures**

21 April 2010, 3:00-6:00 p.m., Conference Room 2, UN Headquarters, New York

Address by Marc Scheuer, Director, United Nations Alliance of Civilizations

Like Peace, Rapprochement is a powerful and inspiring motto and we all realize, I believe, that this is part of the very core business of the United Nations.

It evokes a number of closely related challenges.

The challenge of reconciliation, with the patient reconstruction of links at all levels, between societies, which have been deeply divided by conflict along some cultural fault-lines. It takes more than political and diplomatic efforts. It takes a myriad of small steps, community leadership, and the involvement of all.

The challenge of overcoming prejudice and stereotypes, fed by ignorance, fear of change, oversimplification. They have a terrible blinding effect, as others cannot be seen anymore as men and women, holders of the same human rights and with an urge to belong.

The challenge of integrating diversity in public policies and citizen's initiatives as a driving force for transformation and development.

The challenge of living together as equal citizens and finding ways, some times, to respectfully dissent without that having any major impact on the fabric of our societies.

And I assume "Rapprochement" is also about the challenge of ensuring that in our system of world governance, in our crucial debates, in the way we understand progress, the echoes of a growing number of cultures can be heard.

We all know that cultures are living things (if I may), that they lend and borrow, that they are made of many different components, that they are themselves not only constantly changing but constantly irrigated by different currents, large and small.

We agree that the world is not made of imaginary cultural monoliths.

Dynamic and open to exchange as they are, cultures are vital in the way they help us all to relate and engage, as free human beings, not locked against our will in any particular culture but drawing on that culture and borrowing from others to move on, as individuals and members of various communities, as we confront a changing world and changing personal circumstances.

Demonstrating the benefits of cultural diversity and mutual borrowing, on the long time of history and the shorter time of our century is a particularly useful idea and a fascinating one. Some data are available, for instance on the positive impact of economic migrations, but a lot more would be needed in a more comprehensive perspective.

Indeed, as always, we have a tendency to know more about the problems than about the benefits. We may also have distorted views, from looking at too narrow situations.

Of course, the Alliance of Civilizations will contribute to the year of Rapprochement of Cultures, steered by UNESCO on the basis of that Organization's tremendous know-how and accumulation of wisdom and experience. Bridging divides is its *raison d'être*.

What it will bring, in particular, will be what we call "a dialogue that delivers", by which we mean: a dialogue that delivers change on the ground, across cultural lines.

This is why the Alliance is not only an intergovernmental affair. It is a mobilizing force, a global matchmaker which connects together, in large numbers, a variety of partners: political leaders and policy-makers, business leaders, international organizations, heads of foundations, human rights advocates, cities, universities, religious leaders, grassroots initiatives, journalists and editors, youth.

They provide the Alliance community with the opportunity to create projects and come up with innovative solutions to address the complex issues that our diverse societies face today.

No doubt, "rapprochement" calls for huge efforts in terms of education. Learning languages, getting a sense of the diversity of cultures and religions, revisiting history, acquiring intercultural skills are all essential.

It calls for a broader range of views and opinions on divisive intercultural issues being put at the disposal of the media.

It calls for creative partnerships on the internet and in the media industry.

It calls for courageous leadership from political authorities and keen attention from other respected voices in our societies, including religious leaders.

It is also important that opportunities be provided for people to connect directly, to cooperate across cultural divides, to build together projects, which will address common problems that citizens, at different levels, are faced with, irrespective of their background, religion, language, origin.....or sometime because of these factors, which they want to overcome. (Examples include a youth early-warning project in Serbia to track and defuse inter-community tensions and the replication throughout Europe of a local Dutch initiative, under which Muslim families invite mainstream neighbors for breaking fast during Ramadan).

And we must recognize that the role of women and Youth is critical to Rapprochement and act accordingly.

The Alliance has acquired experiences and developed networks, which it will bring to bear in the context of the Year of Rapprochement.

The Alliance and the High Representative, President Jorge Sampaio, are looking forward to a very successful Year of Rapprochement of Cultures, which will figure prominently at the Rio de Janeiro Forum of the Alliance of the Alliance, on 27 – 29 May.

Let me conclude by suggesting that the respect for cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue are likely to be elements of an emerging global culture, next to other common fundamental values, such as freedom, justice, equality, participatory governance, solidarity, respect for nature and share responsibility.

If we work hard enough.....