

Embargoed until 11.00 am

Tuesday 29 May 2007



Rt Hon Helen Clark Prime Minister

Address at
Opening Ceremony of the
Third Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue

Copthorne Hotel
Waitangi, Northland

11.00 am

Wednesday 9 May 2007

Your Excellency President Macapagal-Arroyo of the Philippines,

Ministers,

Distinguished participants and guests.

On behalf of the New Zealand Government, it is my pleasure today to welcome you to Waitangi and to New Zealand for this Third Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue.

You have come to a special place for New Zealanders. On 6 February 1840, representatives of Maori tribes and the British Crown agreed to sign a treaty here. That is why Waitangi is widely regarded as the birthplace of our nation.

The representatives of Maori and of the British who gathered in Waitangi knew that if they were to live alongside each other in this country, they would need to respect each other. The Treaty of Waitangi proclaimed our unity, and at the same time acknowledged our diversity.

While relations between indigenous people and those who came later have not always been easy in the past 167 years, we have found ways to reconcile and move forward. Now as our originally bi-cultural nation has become highly multi-cultural, we have the challenge of embracing even wider diversity. My government works hard to ensure that all ethnicities and faiths are valued and included in 21st century New Zealand.

I hope that the spirit of Waitangi will assist your work over these three days on how the many faiths and cultures in our region can live in harmony.

We live in a highly culturally diverse region where all of the world's major religions are represented.

At the inter-governmental level we have many regional institutions – in the South Pacific, the Pacific Islands Forum; and, in East Asia, ASEAN, and now the East Asia Summit. Along with APEC which spans the Pacific, these organisations keep government leaders, ministers and officials in regular contact, and build greater understanding in many areas.

But it's important that regional conversations aren't restricted to the government level. To advance development, peace, and security our peoples need to engage – as you as faith leaders and representatives are at this Dialogue.

Within our region there are places, such as in the south of Thailand and the southern Philippines, where communities face violence carried out in the name of faith and directed at those who do not share that faith.

We have had serious incidents of terrorism – like the 2002 Bali bombing, fomented by extremists invoking the name of religion. The heightened tensions of the Middle East have spilled over into our region, in the form of religious radicalisation.

The UN's Alliance of Civilisations Report, discussed at the major regional symposium in Auckland last week, described our world as "alarmingly out of balance". It said that "the need to build bridges between societies, to promote dialogue and understanding, and to forge the political will to address the world's imbalances has never been greater."

I am sure that it is an appreciation of the need to act to build greater understanding which has motivated everyone who has gathered at Waitangi. That is certainly the reason why the New Zealand Government has made it a priority to host and support both this Regional Interfaith Dialogue and the Alliance of Civilisations Symposium last week.

For we do not accept that there is anything inevitable or unavoidable about tension and conflict between ethnicities, cultures, and faiths.

We believe it is up to responsible nations and people of good will to build bridges across the divides which have been created.

Fundamentally we believe most peoples yearn for the same things – peace, security and opportunity for our families and communities .

Bound by our common human aspirations, we can contribute to building a better world. That is what my government is committed to.

This is the third meeting of this Regional Interfaith Dialogue since it began in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in December 2004. Good progress has been made in building trust in this process. Many delegates here now know each other well. Others are new to this forum - and bring fresh ideas with them.

At the Cebu Dialogue in March last year, there was a robust discussion on media issues. The meeting took place in the wake of the controversy over the Mohammed cartoons. Participants agreed to encourage the media to develop voluntary codes and standards, so that it could contribute more to mutual understanding.

The vital role of education in promoting interfaith understanding was highlighted in Cebu, as was the importance of co-operation between faiths in fostering peace and security.

And participants also noted the potential of grassroots interfaith linkages as instruments for development and promoting community cohesion.

These key themes – education, media, security and development – are echoed in the Waitangi Dialogue agenda under the overarching “Building Bridges” theme.

I know that you will also be taking stock of developments and interfaith activities around the region since the last meeting in Cebu.

Here in New Zealand, members of our delegation to the first Regional Interfaith Dialogue in Yogyakarta eighteen months ago were inspired to propose the development of a broadly based statement on religious diversity in New Zealand.

A statement has now been developed as a community-based initiative. It offers a framework within which issues of religion can be discussed by faith communities and the wider public.

It emphasises:

- that all faiths and beliefs should be treated equally before the law
- the right to freedom of expression of faith and belief
- the right to safety and security for those of all faiths and beliefs
- the need for our public services and workplaces to accommodate diverse beliefs and practices; and
- the importance of education in promoting understanding.

I believe this statement is a positive outcome of our country's involvement in interfaith processes, and I commend it to our wider community for debate.

A new feature on this Dialogue programme will be discussion of the UN's Alliance of Civilisations initiative. Some of you here today attended the Symposium on the Alliance of Civilisations in Auckland last week. The Alliance shares some common themes with this Dialogue. There will be an opportunity to consider its recommendations, as well as the outcomes of the Auckland Symposium, during this gathering.

The Alliance of Civilisations is a global initiative, launched by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, aimed at overcoming fractures between societies and cultures. It offers genuine alternatives to the bleak prophecy of near inevitable conflict between civilizations, popularised by Samuel Huntingdon in the mid-1990s. In particular it seeks to reduce the polarisation between Islam and the West.

The Auckland Symposium agreed that the Alliance's recommendations for initiatives covering education, youth, media, and migration, made sense for our region. It would be useful to hear how this Dialogue views the Alliance Report and how it could be taken forward in our region.

My hope for this Waitangi Dialogue is that, like the Alliance of Civilisations, it will move beyond words, to deliver a practical plan of action for improving co-operation amongst our region's faith communities

If we can make progress here; if we can build real bridges based on respect and acknowledgement of the shared values and worth of our different faiths and beliefs, then we defeat those who would trade in hate.

I hope that the outcome will be a Waitangi Declaration and Action Plan which will help ensure that extreme voices do not drown out those of moderation and reason.

In that way, the outcomes of this meeting will be consistent with those of the original Waitangi document – the Treaty which led to the birth of our nation, and which guides reconciliation between Maori and other New Zealanders to this day.

I wish you well in your deliberations, and am now pleased to declare the Third Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue officially open.

Thank you.