



ALLIANCE of CIVILIZATIONS

UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations First Annual Forum. Opening session

Madrid, January 15, 2008

Mister President of the Government of Spain
Mister Prime Minister of Turkey
Mister Secretary-General of the United Nations
Ministers
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is with great pleasure and – I admit – some emotion that I address to those present my warmest welcome to the First Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations.

When, nine months ago, I was called upon to skipper this United Nations' initiative, I must confess I was dominated by the uncertainty of the enterprise and the gigantic nature of the mission that lay ahead of me.

For so unpredictable an adventure I had to rely on a Report as my chart, a secretariat of three people as my ship and, as my crew, a Group of Friends of around forty members...

Nevertheless, counteracting this, I was encouraged from the very outset by the unshakeable strength of three certainties: the firm commitment of the Secretary-General of the United Nations to this initiative, without which I should probably not have agreed to embark on this journey; the co-operation and unconditional support of the two countries that co-sponsored it; and, lastly, my profound conviction that the Alliance of Civilizations is the right political initiative, one that, at the appropriate level and at the right time, will fill a gap at international level, a gap that had to be made good without delay, as we are all able to see each day and all around us.

Indeed, allow me to underscore the extent to which the issues dealt with by the Alliance have become central to our globalised world and to which the four pillars of sustainable development, now so often talked about, include preservation of cultural diversity.

Now this is the point where the Alliance comes in as an initiative designed to deal with the challenges that arise in the governance of cultural diversity, understood in the multiplicity of its dimensions – at local, national, regional and international level; of its players – citizens, communities, civil society organisations, local or central governments and the international community; and also of the policies involved – of which, as you know, the Alliance has selected four: education, youth, the media and migration.

In my view, the Alliance of Civilizations is clearly the result of a shared political will directed at harmonising adequate action to confront culture and religious problems and threats to security, stability and peace in the world.

From my point of view the major trump card of the Alliance of Civilizations is that it is oriented towards action and towards the obligation of results.

Nine months after taking office, the grounds for my convictions are considerably more solid, and the reasons for my optimism as to the future of the Alliance have been sedimented to a greater extent.

The first Annual Forum of the Alliance, which we are inaugurating here and now, is of itself a success for at least three reasons.

Firstly, because it shows that we have been able, without ignoring it, however, to overcome the deadlock of the theoretical and conceptual debates on dialogue between and/or confrontation of civilisations and to bring the discussion into the open.

Secondly, because the first tangible results have been achieved and will be presented during the Forum – I am thinking particularly of the National Plans for cultural dialogue that several governments will present, of the Partnership Accords and Letters of Intent that are to be signed with certain international organisations; of the Alliance's flagship projects, the Clearinghouse and the Rapid Response Media Mechanism; and also the Solidarity for Youth Fund. Besides these, understandably, there are all those projects that the Alliance has inspired, one in particular of extreme importance, that are to be announced shortly.

Thirdly, because, for the first time, we have brought together, here, a vast, significant range of civil society representatives, including a large number of youths that constitute the true basis of the sustainability of the Alliance, its final addressees and its first agents.

For all these reasons this Forum of the Alliance is both a point of arrival and a goal on which all our efforts converge. But it neither is – nor could be – an end of itself, for otherwise we would incur a fatal deviation of purpose. Rather the contrary, this Forum should indeed mark a new starting point, the start to a new chapter in the still short life of the Alliance, the chapter of its deepening and consolidation.

Excellencies
Dear Friends

A few moments ago I spoke about the reasons for my optimism. I can imagine what you would now like to share with me. However, before finalising, let me also share some of my concerns.

The Alliance deals with fundamental issues that will not be resolved in the short term. The temptation to give up will always be with us, but we must never resign ourselves.

We know that the history of nations, of religions and of civilisations is made up of light and dark, that periods of peace have alternated with those of war, moments of confrontation, conflict and intolerance with a will for dialogue, for openness to our fellow men, for a culture of difference, tolerance and universalist values.

As I see it, dialogue of civilizations, cultures and religions is possible, fruitful and necessary. It is the best counterpoint for isolation, mistrust and confrontation, and also as the most powerful incentive to openness, understanding and tolerance.

But history shows us that this dialogue is not easy and that, if not taught and cultivated, it gives way to monologue or silence, almost always the yeast of dangerous extremist attitudes and fanatical urges.

Indeed, at times, cultures also tend to affirm their identities through confrontation with others. And cultural peculiarities, legitimised by religious or ethnic factors, have acted as vectors of conflict and domination.

Each civilization, each religion and each culture, within itself, must therefore be tolerant and recognise the right to difference. Not only because intolerance of a culture or religion is proportional to intolerance within itself but also because intolerance of a culture or religion is not stable but has varied throughout time.

The international situation created in the wake of September 11, as well as all the other terrorist attacks that have tragically marked our times, have created a pressing need for dialogue between civilisations, religions and cultures, a dialogue that must be encouraged.

It is against this background of urgency that the Alliance of Civilizations has a role to play as a new instrument of the United Nations in the construction of peace, in the wide sense of the term as well as in helping to find answers to our current shared huge difficulties of living together as equals but different.

Its field of action clearly lies both upstream and downstream of situations of conflict – upstream, as an instrument of prevention; downstream, as a therapy or cure within the framework of reconstruction of peace.

There are those who will see in this twofold frontier a weakness of the Alliance, while others will, as I do, see it as an opportunity and their field of opportunities.

The Alliance is not designed to become yet another heavy, bureaucratic body of the international machine. The Alliance ought to be a pioneering example of how Governments, the International Community and civil societies can work together in order to deliver.

When all is said and done, we are dealing with something that affects the whole of mankind, with changes that have to be brought about at glocal level, that is, changes that will have to be generated by a combination of a top-down approach with a bottom-up one.

In our world marked by such profound imbalances, it is not just the planet that is showing an advanced state of degradation, but also human atmosphere. Therefore, the dialogue between civilizations, religions and cultures has turned into a humanitarian urgency that cannot be postponed.

Excellencies

Deepening and unity. These are the two key words that ought to set our course and act as cement for the Alliance to overcome recurrent pessimism and criticism.

Fortunately, despite the rough sea of scepticism and frustration, we may realize that – like the earth –“*eppure si muove*”, and express confidence that our ship will be able to withstand the pitfalls and difficulties of the journey.

Let me finish by reiterating my motto: the Alliance of Civilizations is the right initiative, at the right time.

Together, we shall work to ensure that it will also bring about the right results, not some day, but right now, at our Forum. Let us hope that this will be so! *Inch'Allah!*

Thank you one and all