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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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**ADDRESS UPON RECEIVING ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS REPORT
Istanbul, 13 November 2006**

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Bosporus currents are notoriously strong, flowing one way on the surface, and the opposite way underneath. Yet, for centuries the Turkish people have successfully ridden these currents as they navigated the boundary between Europe and Asia, and between the Islamic world and the West – and they have prospered as a result.

It therefore feels especially appropriate that we should gather here for the release of the Report of the High-level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations. After all, if we are to build bridges between civilizations, what better place to begin than the city that has built a literal bridge between continents!

I wish to pay tribute to Prime Minister Erdogan and Prime Minister Rodriguez Zapatero, for sponsoring the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, and to all members of the High-level Group who, over the past twelve months, have dedicated so much time and energy to this Report.

The Report rightly stresses that an embrace of differences – differences in opinion, in culture, in belief, in way of life – has long been a driving force of human progress.

Thus it was that, during Europe's "Dark Ages", the Iberian Peninsula flourished through the interaction of Muslim, Christian and Jewish traditions. Later, the Ottoman Empire prospered not simply because of its armies, but because it was also an empire of ideas, in which Muslim art and technology were enriched by Jewish and Christian contributions.

Regrettably, several centuries later, our own globalized era is marked by rising intolerance, extremism and violence against the other. Closer proximity and improved communications have often led not to mutual understanding and friendship, but to tension and mutual mistrust. Many people, particularly in the developing world, have come to fear the global village both as a cultural onslaught and as an economic drain. For them, globalization threatens their values as well as their wallets.

The terror attacks of 9/11, war and turmoil in the Middle East, ill-considered words and drawings have all helped to reinforce this perception, and have inflamed tensions between

different peoples and cultures. They have notably strained relations between followers of the three great monotheistic faiths.

Today, at the very time when international migration has brought unprecedented numbers of people of different creed or culture to live as fellow-citizens, the misconceptions and stereotypes underlying the idea of a “clash of civilizations” have come to be more and more widely shared. Some groups seem eager to foment a new war of religion, this time on a global scale – and the insensitivity, or even cavalier disregard, of others towards their beliefs or sacred symbols makes it easier for them to do so.

In short, the idea of an alliance of civilizations could not have been more timely.

Not that this Group has fallen into the trap of accepting the implied division of the world into clearly distinct and separate “civilizations”. As you rightly note, this is an anachronism. Today, for better or worse, we clearly do not live in different civilizations, in the sense that our ancestors did.

Migration, integration and technology have brought different races, cultures and ethnicities closer together, breaking down old barriers and creating new realities. We live, as never before, cheek by jowl, bombarded by many different influences and ideas.

Demonization of the “other” has proved the path of least resistance, when a healthy dose of introspection would better serve us all. After all, as your report says, much of the current discontent in the Islamic world feeds off the Muslim Ummah’s own shortcomings. At the same time, the West invites criticism through its perceived doublespeak on issues of human rights and democracy.

In the 21st century, we remain hostage to our sense of grievances, and to feelings of entitlement. Our narratives have become our prison, paralyzing discourse and hindering understanding. Thus, many people throughout the world, particularly Muslims, see the West as a threat to their beliefs and values, their economic interests, their political aspirations. Evidence to the contrary is simply disregarded or rejected as incredible. Likewise, many in the West dismiss Islam as a religion of extremism and violence, despite a history of relations between the two in which commerce, cooperation and cultural exchange have played at least as important a part as conflict.

It is vital that we overcome these resentments, and establish relations of trust between communities. We should start by reaffirming – and demonstrating – that the problem is not the Koran, nor the Torah or the Bible. Indeed, I have often said the problem is never the faith – it is the faithful, and how they behave towards each other.

We must stress the basic values that are common to all religions: compassion; solidarity; respect for the human person; the Golden Rule of “do as you would be done by”. At the same time, we need to get away from stereotypes, generalizations and preconceptions, and take care not to let crimes committed by individuals or small groups dictate our image of an entire people, an entire region, or an entire religion.

Today, abundant research shows the benefits that migrants can bring to their new homelands – not only as labourers but as consumers, entrepreneurs and contributors to a more diverse and dynamic culture. But these benefits are not evenly distributed, and often not

appreciated by the pre-existing population, parts of which tend to see immigrants as a threat to their material interests, their security and their traditional way of life.

In Europe especially, governments have been slow to grasp the need to develop strategies for integrating the new arrivals and their children into the host society, especially where the new are demarcated from the old by religion or skin colour. Or they have expected new communities to conform to a static vision of the country's national identity, instead of being willing to re-think how far values and culture need to be shared by different communities living together within a democratic State. Similarly, this country has found its path to membership of the European Union strewn with obstacles, behind which we can often detect a concept of European identity that implicitly or explicitly excludes Muslims.

As a result, many second- and third-generation migrants have grown up in ghettos, often facing high rates of unemployment, relative poverty and crime, and regarded by their so-called "indigenous" neighbours with a mixture of fear and contempt.

Unlearning intolerance is in part a matter of legal protection. The right to freedom of religion -- and to freedom from discrimination based on religion -- has long been enshrined in international law, and incorporated into the domestic law of many countries.

But, as your report suggests, law is only a starting point.

Any strategy to build bridges must depend heavily on education -- not just about Islam or Christianity, but about all religions, traditions and cultures, so that myths and distortions can be seen for what they are.

We must create opportunities for young people, offering them a credible alternative to the siren song of hate and extremism. We must give them a real chance to join in improving the world order, so that they no longer feel the urge to smash it.

We must safeguard freedom of expression, while working with our brothers and sisters in the media to prevent it being used to spread hatred, or inflict humiliation. We must convince them that rights carry with them an inherent responsibility, and should be exercised with sensitivity, especially when dealing with symbols and traditions that are sacred to other people.

In all of this, there is a crucial need for leadership. Public authorities should not only raise awareness, but take the lead in condemning intolerance and extremism. It is their job to see that pledges of non-discrimination are enshrined in law, and that the law is enforced in practice.

But their responsibility doesn't exclude ours. All of us, as individuals, help to form the political and cultural climate of our societies. We must always be ready to correct stereotypes and distorted images, and to speak up for victims of discrimination.

All of these are important lessons, which must be applied to relations within societies, and between them.

But, as you rightly emphasize, they will have little impact if the current climate of fear and suspicion continues to be refuelled by political events, especially those in which Muslim peoples -- Iraqis, Afghans, Chechens, and perhaps most of all, Palestinians -- are seen to be the victims of military action by non-Muslim powers.

We may wish to think of the Arab-Israeli conflict as just one regional conflict amongst many. But, as I told the General Assembly in September, it is not. No other conflict carries such a powerful symbolic and emotional charge among people far removed from the battlefield.

As long as the Palestinians live under occupation, exposed to daily frustration and humiliation; and, as long as Israelis are blown up in buses and in dance halls: so long will passions everywhere be inflamed.

It may seem unfair that progress in improving relations between fellow-citizens in Europe, or between – for example – Canada and Indonesia, should be held hostage to a solution of one of humanity's most intractable political problems. And certainly the lack of such a solution must not be used as an excuse for neglecting other issues. But in the end the linkage cannot be wished away.

I believe it is imperative to work on both fronts at once – seeking both to improve social and cultural understanding between peoples, and at the same time to resolve political conflicts, in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Let us take our inspiration from an inscription that can be seen not far from here, in the Istanbul Archeological Museum – and which, thanks to the generosity of the Turkish people, can also be seen in replica at UN Headquarters in New York, outside the Security Council chamber. It records the peace treaty concluded between the Hittite and Egyptian empires, after the bloody battle of Kadesh in 1279 BC.

Ending decades of mistrust and warfare, this treaty was a milestone of its era. It reached far beyond mere cessation of hostilities, committing both sides to mutual assistance and cooperation. It was, in fact, the literal embodiment of an alliance between two great civilizations.

Today, as we meet to make our own commitments, and to share our vision of a peaceful future, I hope we can all be inspired by this ancient pact to build our own Alliance between civilizations, cultures, faiths and communities.

In that spirit, and with great gratitude for your efforts, I accept your Report. In the short time that is left to me as Secretary-General I shall seek, in consultation with my successor, to establish a suitable mechanism for following up and implementing its recommendations.

Thank you very much.