

Speech by the President of the Government of Spain, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, delivered on completion of the work by the High Level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations Istanbul, Monday, 13 November 2006

Secretary General of the United Nations, my friend Kofi Annan, Prime Minister of Turkey, members of the High Level Group, ladies and gentlemen,

Above all, in these initial words I should like to thank the members of the High Level Group for the report they have presented to us today, offering us the results of the intelligence, passion and dedication of an exemplary group of men and women who have worked selflessly throughout a year of intense debates and profound reflection. And I should like to thank most especially the Secretary General, Kofi Annan, for his vision, leadership and commitment, advancing an initiative that could never have come into being without his unstinting dedication.

As you may imagine, for me it is a matter of great personal satisfaction to see that such an important stage as that which we are concluding today, within the project of the Alliance of Civilizations, has taken shape and materialized, and to see that, from here on, the Action Plan, with the development of all the initiatives considered and discussed by the Group - initiatives which will make a decisive contribution to the culture of peace, understanding and the recognition of each other and of our diversity - will help isolate and marginalize theories of the clash of cultures and civilizations, theories of the supremacy of force, theories based on defeatism.

On many occasions, the work of political leaders consists in making official what people already practice in daily life within their societies. It is now more than a quarter of a century since my country transformed itself from a dictatorship into a democracy, advancing from obscurantism to freedom, from uniformity to diversity. This transformation was achieved rapidly and peacefully because Spanish society, in its customs and everyday life, was much more democratic than the institutions of the State.

Every day television news bulletins and the pages of our daily papers inform us of conflict, violence and war, of the clash of civilizations. Every day voices in Parliaments can be heard speaking of this clash of civilizations, albeit in order to condemn it. Indeed, some have considered the project for an Alliance of Civilizations merely a naïve, well-intentioned dream, as if only pessimism were the harbinger of realism, as if only desperation possessed a solid, material consistency, as if only bitter words sufficed to describe the world we live in.

Nevertheless, the real world does not lack examples of peaceful coexistence between peoples of different cultures and religions. What is needed are words telling us of their coexistence and understanding. There is no lack of friendship in schoolrooms between young people of different origins; neither do we lack examples of collaboration between universities or companies; nor is there any lack of long-running experiences of coexistence and cooperation among workers from different countries and religions in factories and workshops, in the depths of mines, in the cramped spaces of fishing boats, in the fields and on farms, on the scaffolding of building sites. This, too, is the reality of civilizations.

It is not an optimistic, naïve dream, it is the reality of daily peaceful coexistence and understanding, the evident day-to-day reality; what is needed are institutions and mechanisms to protect and extend that peaceful, resplendent reality. I am sure we will be able to find, within our cultures, in all cultures, solid reasons for mutual understanding with other religions and cultures, with other civilizations.

If emigrants, workers, students and neighbours are capable of approaching their cultures and finding instruments for immediate and daily understanding, for close coexistence, for continual interaction with members of other cultures, cannot intellectuals, opinion makers and politicians also find them? Why dedicate so much energy to highlighting the borders of our differences instead of learning from people who are shaping the embrace that unites us?

Everywhere on Earth, in a world that is ever more human, men and women are facing the same problems. Anywhere, in the largest city and in the smallest village, people my age have elderly parents and teenage children, they are concerned about their parents' health, about their children's education, about improving the living conditions of their families and their communities.

Faced with such concerns, our neighbour is not our enemy, but an ally. The major enemies are enemies common to all Humankind: disease, hunger, ignorance, violence, oppression. That is why we represent those millions of men and women who coexist in our cities and cooperate in their jobs and in institutions; men and women who demand that their voice be heard above the noise of gunfire and bombs, and that we put an end to violence and its justifications.

In all cultures, in all countries, voices can be heard attempting to destroy the world's diversity, beginning with the diversity within their own societies. Those who would combat the values of other cultures and religions with violence will sooner or later use violence against the people of their own culture and religion.

Against those who would sacrifice peace to defend our values we must raise our voices to tell them that peace is the last of our values that we would sacrifice, because without peace there is no freedom, no justice, no dignity and no prosperity. And I speak on behalf of a country whose citizens have demonstrated, on numerous occasions, their will for peace and have proved that peace is the most fertile soil, the most solid foundation for freedom and progress.

We conquered our freedoms peacefully and that has made them more solid; we constructed our political order peacefully and that has made it more fruitful, and, when we suffered our worst terrorist attack, we Spaniards, so often struck by terrorism, reacted peacefully. On that tragic 11 March 2004, there was not a single xenophobic act, not one, and, because we detest revenge, we found consolation in Justice. Violence shattered the lives of our brothers and sisters, but not the integrity and principles of our people. Therefore, neither the violence perpetrated against us nor the incitement to revenge fostered by some were able to alter the Spanish people's will for peace. That is our principal strength.

Secretary General, highest representative of the United Nations, that great civilizational project, that forum for meeting, for peace, for understanding,

The Alliance of Civilizations is an alliance of ordinary men and women, men and women who peacefully coexist and cooperate daily, thus enabling the world to progress. Day by day, the story of their lives will become the history of Humankind, and we, their representatives, must bear witness. Therefore, we must be the first to provide the means for peace, that most noble aspiration of human beings.

Thank you very much.