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ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

UN HIGH REPRESENTATIVE FOR
THE ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

**Address to the Forum of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs
of the Muslim and the West**

*Astana,
October, 17, 2008*

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen
and if I may call you that,
Dear Friends

- I am very grateful to the Kazakhstan authorities for inviting me to participate in this most relevant initiative.
- Alas, much to my regret, due to last minute agenda constraints, I am unable to reach Astana on time.
- However, I am more than happy that, thanks to modern communications facilities, I am able to address this distinguished audience.
- Thus, let me start by greeting you all and to say how I honoured and privileged I feel for having the opportunity to share with you some thoughts on the issues we will debate during the day.
- When I was President of the Portuguese Republic, I used to stress that the biggest asset of a country, apart from its desirable natural richness and level of development or wealth, is its people.

- Now as a UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, let me emphasize this point again and again, particularly in this part of the world, where gorgeous societies are one of its most striking features.
- Gorgeous societies, not only because of demographic trends but also, in most of the cases, because of the vigour, the sense of civility and hospitality of peoples.
- Let me just share with you two rather impressionistic thoughts on civility, an old concept that we wrongly tend to neglect.
- In my view, civility is the foundational principle of society and plays a central role in binding people together. As the cultivation of habits and behaviour of personal living are important for the success of a community, civic virtues are the core of human rights.
- I see in civility the concrete expression of a minimum of common humanity shared by every man, woman and child on earth. This is why I attach such significance to it. Because after all civility is about dignity of life and it matters to the universality of Human Rights which, nowadays, is under siege.
- In fact, current human rights controversies come up against a backdrop of growing tensions over a series of political issues and of growing cultural stereotypes.

- But these disputes are a clear example of increased polarization and, in my view we need to think creatively about how to operate beyond the restricted bounds of such debates and how best to deepen understanding between different and often hostile cultures and communities.

- This, at least, is the approach that the Alliance of Civilizations' UN initiative develops, avoiding the reproduction of well-known deadlocks and long-standing fault lines that divide the broader UN member countries constituency.

- Indeed, in the matters that the Alliance deals with, differences of perceptions and views exist and should be neither ignored nor avoided because after all they are part of the problems addressed by the Alliance. If differences really did not matter, the Alliance would lack its *raison d'être*.

- But first and foremost, the Alliance is a results-oriented initiative, aimed at bringing change to the lives of ordinary people. And it happens that ordinary people have more in common with each other than divisive differences and that given the opportunity they will explore their common interests even across, for instance, geo-political divides.

- This is why I care about civility because it encompasses basic values and virtues, because after all it recognizes that we share one common humanity and provides a minimum solution to deal with its miseries.

- Now the second preliminary point that I want to make regards hospitality. It can seem trivial. But hospitality matters a lot as an expression of a mainstream civility, based once again on similarity between all human beings.

- As a way of “equalizing” a stranger to the host, making him feel protected and taken care of, hospitality represents what universality might mean in a multicultural world.

- Hospitality as the expression of a universal right and duty puts linguistic, racial, religious, cultural and other differences into their proper perspective.

- The argument of cultural and religious diversity cannot over-ride the reality that we all share the most basic attributes in common – that we all feel pain, hunger, but also many kinds of deprivation such as the sense of exclusion, dislocation discrimination and humiliation.

- What I want to stress is that, after all, peace is effective when it has its roots in local communities, in individuals and families. Violence begins at home, in the streets, in neighborhoods and in cities making it essential to promote acceptance of diversity and respect for the others. This is a first point.
- Now, the second complementary point I want to emphasize is that global is local. Global tensions are impacting increasingly locally. Conflicts anywhere are now conflicts everywhere.
- This means two things – on the one hand, we need a global strategy to promote good governance of cultural diversity. On the other hand, much of successful conflict prevention and peace building are local tasks.

Ladies and Gentlemen

- This Conference will address very topical issues that represent big challenges for our societies. Moreover, they are at the core of the Alliance of Civilizations' UN initiative.
- Let me use this opportunity to focus on one of the main themes that will be discussed today – the “role of religion in the modern world”.

- Whatever the expression “modern world” means, let’s recognize that what really makes a difference in our times is not only new technologies, scientific discoveries, information revolution or even globalization, but also the resurgent role of religions almost everywhere.
- Even in Europe, where secularization of religious behavior made it a private affair, and secularism was responsible for the clear separation of state and religion, religious movements are thriving.
- People now talk about God quite often and fundamentalists of all kinds (Christians, including the Catholic church, orthodox Judaism, sects and Muslims) are growing and have been very vocal in their request to express their faiths in the public sphere.
- The expectation that religious movements and faith-based politics would recede in influence or disappear altogether in the context of modernization and globalization has clearly been disproved by the emergence of religious-political movements with strong popular support in a number of regions and across several different faith traditions.
- Therefore, we cannot ignore the ongoing debates on whether religion can have a legitimate role in good governance and on how to manage relations between secular and religious political movements, both within and between countries.

- What does the interface between religious approaches and democracy really mean and how can suspicion between secular and religious actors be overcome to allow for constructive dialogue? How can we unite our efforts to counter increased polarization and extremism in societies ?
- These are the questions to be asked, avoiding the pitfalls of fundamentalisms of all kinds, including those of a fundamentalist secular mind.
- Actually, there is growing recognition that the success of peace processes in many parts of the world depends upon effective engagement with religious communities who often wield a great deal of influence over large constituencies.
- However, we are facing a paradox because, on the hand, mechanisms for such engagement are often lacking and, on the other hand, there is a proliferation of so-called “interfaith initiatives” of different kinds.
- Actually a clear distinction should be drawn between inter-faith dialogues, on the one hand, and theological disputes, on the other, the latter being reserved for theologians.
- It is time for political decision-makers to engage in initiatives that organize, facilitate and study on-going dialogue processes with diverse religious and secular political movements.

- It is time to provide platforms that can help prepare the ground for such processes. These processes aim to enhance and facilitate meaningful dialogue and to explore ways in which decision-makers in both contexts can contribute to prevent conflicts between as well as within countries and societies.

- In this regard, the challenge seems be threefold:
 - To raise awareness of political leaders and policy-makers in relation to the importance, nature and variety of social activist movements motivated by religious faith, as well as to the social impact of inter-faith initiatives.

 - To associate religious leaders to the process of political dialogue when appropriate, particularly because of the role and relationship of religion to social change, particularly, on issues such as education, social justice and anti-poverty, civic engagement, and/or the impact of the media.

 - to explore opportunities for conflict prevention, resolution and mediation involving religious leaders and activist parties.

Excellencies

- In my view, the Alliance of Civilizations' UN initiative is in a key position to promote this kind of engagement both at national and/or local levels, and within the UN system.

- It can provide a connecting forum for dialogue between different inter-faith initiatives or between political leadership and non-violent religious movements that often hold the key to successful negotiations and to the implementation of policy measures. It can also play a connecting role and eventually provide a platform for the incubation of processes that will be pursued beyond the Alliance.

- I really think that interfaith dialogue should be promoted at large. Open communication facilitates mutual understanding and when words are translated into collaborative action we can achieve greater shared security, our common goal.

- *Shared security*, which builds on the notion of human security, recognizes that human dignity (including the right to a decent life) lies at the heart of any effort to promote peace.

- Further, the concept of *shared security* is not limited to the security of individuals or nations. Included in it is the wellbeing of the most marginalized, since people and nations are interrelated. Security is therefore linked to the ability of neighbors (individuals and countries) to cooperate to promote the flourishing of life. Importantly, this approach also stresses the collective responsibility to achieve *shared security*.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

- Socio-economic marginalization and discrimination generate disaffection and intolerance, and aggravate the chasm between Muslim and Western publics.
- As we all know, this vicious circle is also related to international tensions created in the aftermath of September 11, as well as all the other terrorist attacks that have constantly marked this decade.
- Moreover, the dark prediction of an inter-religious clash of civilizations by Samuel Huntington and other western scholars has greatly contributed to building a new paradigm of the world as splitting apart along historic fault lines of culture and religion.

- Thus a so-called divide, opposing two fictional monolithic blocks, Islam and the West, fuels further stereotypes, polarization and mutual intolerance and gives rise to extremism.
- In this regard, let me stress that both Muslims and non-Muslims are concerned by the challenges of security and the threat of social polarization. Millions of Muslim families worry about losing their young to religious and political extremism.
- Therefore, in order to cope with growing rifts between the west and Islam we need new policies at all levels. We need to promote democratic governance of cultural diversity.
- We need to engage civil society at large, youth, religious leaders and the media. But we need also to expand and develop the intercultural dialogue agenda in international relations and give it priority.
- Intercultural dialogue can promote better understanding between communities and can build common understanding or shared values, like tolerance, dignity, respect, autonomy and human rights that are crucial to sustain an “emerging community”.

- Peace-building always requires some common grounds among contenders: they must recognize that violence and terror lead nowhere and that political dialogue is the major way to solve differences and the one that better achieves their national or communities' best interests.

- This means that our battle is about values and human rights, based on the conviction that basic human rights rest on “common convictions” even though those convictions are stated in terms of different philosophic principles and in a background of divergent political and economic systems.

- How to live together in our globalizing world, where clashes anywhere are clashes everywhere and where cultural and religious fault-lines divide our societies? At the end of the day, this is the global challenge we are faced with and that the Alliance of Civilizations aims to address in concrete terms.

Many thanks