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ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

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**INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: HUMAN RIGHTS,
SOCIAL INCLUSION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

Florence, Fiesole,

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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear participants,

- Let me start by greeting H.E. Ms. Trinidad Jimenez and H.E. Mr. Franco Fratini, Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Spain and Italy, and express my deep appreciation for this timely initiative. I should also like to thank the European University Institute of Florence for its availability to host this Seminar.

- Unfortunately, much to my regret, due to a last minute health problem, I was not able to travel to join you in Florence.

- But I am happy that it was nevertheless possible to tape this video message and share with you some thoughts on the important topic that brings you all together.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- Last February I was lucky enough to attend a workshop in Vienna organized by the Commissioner for Human Rights on the “prohibition of incitement to national, racial and religious hatred”.
- There I focused my reflections on the religious component of this topic and basically I made three points that I would like to recall here.
- The first one regards the need to address the general issue of religious minorities in a post-9/11 world, as the 2010 Report by Minority Rights Group International, for instance, so rightly pointed out.
- Ten years after the 11 September attacks now is a good time for the UN to launch a debate on religious minorities worldwide in order to promote and support a more integrated approach to minority rights by States that have signed up to the international human rights framework.

- As some of you know the Alliance of Civilizations has been calling upon its members to develop good governance – or democratic governance – of cultural (and religious) diversity through National Plans covering education, youth, media and migration action and policies.
- National Plans are, in my view, the right instruments to tackle these challenges. One of my priorities for this year is to work closely with countries in order to make the best of this policy tool.
- National Plans are the appropriate framework to develop key policy tools for addressing root causes of conflict and work on the long term prevention.
- Regarding issues such as respect for and protection of religious diversity, it means addressing it on the basis of article 18 of ICCPR through the combined lenses of article 19 on freedom of expression, article 20 on religious hatred, article 26 on non-discrimination and article 27 on the rights of minorities.
- Rights and freedoms are universally valid and mutually reinforcing. Only a balanced combination of all these provisions will provide grounds to make headway regarding respect for equality and diversity of people of various cultures.

- My second point is on the need to develop further cooperation in addressing these issues through more inter-religious dialogue and cooperation.
- Appropriate national laws on freedom of religion are the cornerstone for tolerance and friendship among religious groups within a society, but inter-religious platforms for dialogue – at various levels of leadership from grass roots to top level – are the best and most practical way to address and defuse tensions both in pre and/or post-conflict situations.
- Furthermore city-wide interfaith consultative forums or cross-cultural consultation exercises are key practical ways to build inclusive societies.
- As a former mayor, I really do think that mechanisms of consultation at city level are of the utmost importance in promoting integration of minorities and reinforcing the social cohesion of societies.
- For me it is crystal clear that the promotion and protection of the rights of minorities are in the best interests of society at large and that much more can be done in this regard that ensures sustainable security, development and peace within and among societies.

- My third point regards international and regional cooperation.
- The highly polarized debate over the past decade within the United Nations about whether to craft a new ban on “defamation of religion” in international human rights has not contributed to solving any problems.
- But in my view this deadlock is now past history. New avenues for cooperation aiming at promoting and implementing positive measures - such as education and awareness building – are now available on the basis of the new Resolution on Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or belief, adopted last April.
- The Resolution calls for “strengthened international efforts to foster a global dialogue for the promotion of a culture of tolerance and peace at all levels, based on respect for human rights and diversity of religious and beliefs”.

Excellencies

Dear participants

- The 3rd Implementation Plan for the UNAOC (2011-2013) which will be finalized soon identifies the topics? of religious diversity, religious pluralism and inter-religious dialogue as three of the priorities for action for this year.
- Furthermore one of the four main topics of the Doha debates to be held on the occasion of the 4th Global forum of the Alliance, next December, will be focused on a new concept of citizenship and pluralism.
- In my view, pluralism, namely the need for a new religious pluralism, shapes a promising framework to address the topical issue of religious minorities even if the relation between pluralism and religion has never been unambiguous.
- Furthermore, the search for a wider concept of citizenship might lead to new strategies for a more integrated approach to minority rights that deepens understanding, fosters equality, enhances creative processes and increases participation.
- Citizenship bestows on individuals membership in a national political community. Belonging to a community, based on diversity, equality and participation, is a common aspiration shared by all people.

- It is no coincidence that this is the message emerging from the so-called Arab Spring.
- At the same time, across the western democracies, minority ethnic groups are demanding greater accommodation of their distinctive identities in spite of highly advanced forms of recognition and protection of group-specific rights regarding for instance language, religion or culture.
- How to make of cohesive diversity the true cement of inclusive societies all around the world? How may the recognition of difference lead to multiple disadvantage and affect equality, fairness and justice? What is the role played by religious pluralism in today's politics? How to ensure that the experience of inter-group relations is a model of constructive intercultural exchange? These are topical challenges that now face new but also older democracies.

Excellencies

Ladies and gentlemen

- I am keen on learning about the conclusions of this Seminar in order to build the way forward upon them.

- Further to facilitating debates and being a platform for dialogue, the Alliance also aims at promoting action and practical ways to build a culture of peace, tolerance, respect and trust, and to prevent conflicts.
- In this regard, let me give you a concrete example of how the Alliance can be useful building further upon its Rapid Response Media Mechanism (RRMM).
- You know that the RRMM is a media early warning mechanism on Intercultural Crises. But if upgraded it could be used as a basis for a crisis management mechanism.
- As you know, episodes and incidents involving a cultural dimension have multiplied around the world.
- The very complexity of the issues raised by these crises and the fact that they reflect tensions at the intersection of culture, religion and politics, mean that it is sometimes difficult within the UN system to identify what course of action should be chosen to address them effectively.
- From early detection of signs that a crisis is brewing and providing real-time analysis about them (risk assessment), initiatives by honest brokers to defuse tensions (preventive action) to crisis management (following the occurrence of disruptive actions and

unrest that need to be addressed by means of soft power tools) and consolidation of peace (through facilitation of dialogue and reconciliation), all these dimensions have to be taken into consideration both as independent fields of action and parts of a whole.

- In my view, it is within the UNAOC mission to engage in this field bringing added value to the existing mechanisms by complementing or reinforcing them.
- As I mentioned before, the RRMM could easily be expanded in order to become an early warning mechanism *to court* available to decision makers in the UN system.
- Its existing network of global experts could be reinforced and expanded in order to allow them to raise “red flags” about looming crises and to provide detailed analysis in real time about emerging crises.
- In case of serious religious and cultural tensions that have the potential of destabilizing societies and leading to fully fledged conflicts, this in-depth analysis could be used as a basis for recommendations for UN actions if necessary.
- This is one possible way to be explored.

- Another possible way is rooted in a long term perspective. A twinned top-down and bottom-up approach using soft power tools targeting actions in the field of education, youth, media and migration is sorely needed and would be extremely helpful in realizing rights for all on the ground.
- As the Millennium Development Goals translate a number of rights into concrete targets, I wonder whether one could agree on a Millennium Dialogue or Diversity Goals which would translate the remaining commitment of the Millennium Declaration regarding a culture of peace and tolerance.
- We could try to agree on this. At least it will allow us to make a quantum leap in our millennium endeavours.
- I wish the Doha Forum could lead to this kind of result – the best tribute that we could pay to those civilians worldwide who bore or are bearing a disproportionate share of the profoundly negative impact of 9/11, all other terrorist attacks as well as all the wars on terror that followed.
- After a lost decade, it is time to mark a turning point.
- Many thanks.