

UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations

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Islamic Conference Youth Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation (ICYF-DC)

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- Firstly, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the Islamic Conference Youth Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation for having invited me to address this High-Level Conference as the key note speaker at its Closing Session.
  
- Allow me also to express my deep appreciation to the Azerbaijan's authorities for the most friendly hospitality extended to me since my arrival in Baku.
  
- I feel very happy and privileged to be here today and to have the opportunity to share with you some thoughts on the vital issues you have been dealing with during your 3-days Camp as well as yesterday.
  
- Looking at the intensive programme of the Camp, I must say that I am quite impressed with your energizing views, determination and commitment toward the Alliance of Civilizations.
  
- The comments I have just heard during this morning session are quite positive. It means that you are open to discussion because without an amount of open-minded criticism and self-criticism we cannot make progress.

- When last June, I paid a visit to the headquarters of the ICYF-DC and for the first time I was informed about your plans, I recall my own impression of a great endeavour, an inspirational work and a strong leadership. Now I realize how these two driving-forces have been turned into achievements. Congratulations to you all!

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Dear Friends

- Before raising a couple of hard issues on the Alliance of Civilisations, let me do something that I normally hate – go back to the past and recall a clip of my personal life.
- As you may know, I grew up in Portugal at a time when democracy, freedom of speech and ideas, as well as gender equality were but dreams, whereas abroad, in other Western and European countries, democracy and modernization were part of normal daily life.

- In the sixties, Portugal was a country with no future, shaped by dictatorship, international and diplomatic isolation, a blocked and underdeveloped society and a colonial war covering extensive fronts in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea, where most of the young Portuguese male grounded at the very beginning of their adult lives.
  
- Therefore, there was a deep sense of frustration particularly among younger generations. This frustration has sometimes developed into organized revolt and articulated dissent. But because of the colonial war which was a major cause of dissent and a focus for contest in Portuguese society, many students and anti-war activists were forced to leave the country so they could escape imprisonment and torture by government forces.
  
- Like others in my generation, as a college student of the Law School of the University of Lisbon, I became involved in student opposition against the fascist regime and I led the Lisbon Students Union between 1961 and 1962. Following my graduation, I started my career as a lawyer and have indeed dedicated some time to defend political prisoners.
  
- As you may know, it was the Carnation Revolution on April, 24, 1974, that changed the political regime in Portugal and restored democracy and fundamental civic liberties.

- Why Carnation Revolution?
  
- For two main reasons. On the one hand, because the goals of this almost bloodless, leftist, military led *coup d'état* were achieved with no direct use of violence. On the other hand, because some military insurgents, offered by the population with red carnations as a non –resistance invitation, put these flowers in their gun-barrels, and this image was shown around the world as an icon of the Portuguese Revolution.
  
- Now, why am I recalling you past history?
  
- Well, for two main reasons.
  
- Firstly because an accurate knowledge of the past helps to understand present times and to figure out the main challenges and opportunities to build a better future.
  
- Indeed, people's life can not be frozen in the past. But historical context and legacy are of great importance to shape identity, to make the case for building open and pluralistic minds.

- And an open and pluralistic sense of identity is free from the burden of possessions, memorabilia and reminiscences from the past, which fuels national conflicts as well as xenophobia.
  
- Secondly, more than 30 years after the Carnation Revolution, it is important to try to understand the reason why this is a success story.
  
- In this regard, let me remind you that the revolution in Portugal is considered to have triggered a wider process, which Professor Samuel Huntington of Harvard – well before his dark prediction of the clash of civilizations...- called the “third wave of democratisation”, which spread to Greece, Spain and Latin America.
  
- In my view, three main elements explain the huge success of these complex and even troubled times of fast-moving change: capacity of mutual understanding and dialogue; leadership; moderation.
  
- All together, these three permanent features of our society helped building democracy, fostering economic development and promoting a more inclusive society as well as ensuring stability and peace in the country.

- To conclude these more personal notes, I only would like to stress that each time has its own challenges, threats and opportunities.
  
- For my generation, the wonders we celebrated were more political than technological. We were interested in democracy, human rights, and civil liberties. We had in mind a future in which societies, nations and regions would draw closer as democratic bonds grew stronger, respect for human rights, mutual respect and tolerance spread globally.
  
- Now turning back to the present, the question I would like to raise is: Which are the challenges, threats and opportunities of our globalizing world?
  
- Let me put it bluntly: which are the challenges you, young people, are faced with? What have we – the elder generation – missed in our vision of the future?
  
- To my mind, it is crystal clear that globalization, the resurgent role of religion and the clash of civilizations bring major challenges to our societies, undermining stability and peace. We can not afford to ignore them.
  
- Let me go briefly through these three key issues

## **1st issue:**

### ***Globalization***

- In my view, globalization matters here because it has a big impact on the vexed question of identity
- The accelerating pace of globalization brings individuals and societies closer together than ever before, interconnecting lives and identities in inextricable ways. But fear of homogenization and of losing identity also creates regressions and tends to bring new tribalism.
- As Edward W. Said put it one day, very often people return to comfortable symbols of the past only to affirm an identity that resists against global homogenization, in order to defend themselves against the sense of an all-encompassing global atmosphere.
- Anyway, there is a growing social anxiety about the question of identity.
- In order to prevent conflicts, we need a profound cultural change.
- Let me stress that this is not a minor problem. Cultural dimension of individuals and collective identity is a fundamental part of modern democracies and citizenship.



- Identity questions are nowadays much more critical in our societies as well as tolerance, mutual respect and pluralism are major political challenges for our democracies.
- As our societies are becoming increasingly mobile and open, cultural diversity is a main feature of our times.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> issue:**

### ***Power of religion***

- As the 1990s have been a decade of globalization, spectacular technological gains and modernization of our lifestyle because of the information revolution, we did not realize on time that another force was at work. I mean by that, religions.
- Actually, almost everywhere, religions movements are thriving. People now talk about religions all the time.
- This is, in my view, a new reality and I tend to agree with Madeleine Albright when she argues that the resurgence of religious feeling will continue to influence world events. We cannot afford to ignore this.
- Now we are faced with multiple challenges: how can we best manage events in a world in which there are many religions, with belief systems that are sometimes different? How to harness the unifying potential of faith while containing its capacity to divide? How do we deal with the threat posed by

extremists who, acting in the name of God, try to impose their will on others?

- In recent times, religion has been perceived again as a source of hostility and hatred.
- But to promote the idea that religion is one of the principle sources of harm and violence in the world is not only unfair; it is also dangerous because it diverts our attention from the political roots of most conflicts.
- On the contrary, the positive influence of religion can be felt through the core values and common ideals of the great faith traditions, which urge their believers to respect both the most fundamental human value – the right to life of all – and the right to live in dignity.
- This basic tenet articulates the fundamental requirement for peaceful relations between peoples and societies.
- We can not allow that extremism and fundamentalism divert religion from its humanistic path and make it an instrument of violence and terror.
- We can not accept that in the name of international fight against terrorism, politicians pass off their responsibilities for ensuring citizens a decent life, accordingly to human rights standards that forms the foundation for stable societies and peaceful international relations.

- Politics and religion should join forces against extremism, totalitarianism and exclusion. Politicians, religions leaders, churches and other confessional organizations should unite their efforts to promote a global alliance for peace through education.
- In my view, the main way to prevent cross-cultural tensions and new divides is to improve education for inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue, mutual respect and understanding.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> issue:**

#### ***Clash of civilizations***

- Indeed, we all know this dark prophecy. But can we afford to dismiss it?
- I can not ignore it, but we have to challenge the idea that cultures or civilizations are doomed to confrontation and to war.
- Yes, it is true that we live in an increasingly polarized world. Yes, there is a breakdown of trust and growing tensions among many communities. But supporting the nihilist prophecy of the “clash of civilizations” only deepens and entrenches these trends.
- To subscribe to the view of the clash of civilizations is to surrender in the face of the challenges and to accept that war is unavoidable. It amounts to accept that nothing can be done to improve cross-cultural relations and

address the issues that lead to increased suspicion and hostility among communities.

- That is why there is an urgent need to help developing the conditions for improved intercultural relations and to reject this dreadful prophecy. This will help prepare the way to address the fundamental issues, and help the necessary and unavoidable political solutions to political problems which are around us.

Dear Friends

- As you know, the Report of the High-level Group identifies youth as one of the four key areas of action for the Alliance of Civilizations and outlines a number of recommendations aimed at supporting young people in their efforts to bridge cultural divides.
- These recommendations are reflected in the implementation plan that I have presented last June. It is on-line and you can see that one of our main projects will be a clearing house of initiatives and good practices which should be known. This meets a request I heard this morning. Let me now explain the AoC Forum at Madrid, on the 15/16 January 2008.
- This high-level event will bring together political leaders, representatives of international and regional bodies, donor agencies, civil society groups and foundations to develop partnerships aimed at promoting cross-cultural understanding globally.

- Young people will be playing a central role, with 50 youth leaders invited to contribute their ideas and experience.
- I would like to take this opportunity to tell you a little bit more about the Forum and what it aims to achieve.
- The Alliance of Civilizations Forum will be an action-driven event which will provide participants with a unique international platform to develop joint initiatives and forge partnerships.
- In addition to high-level debates about emerging trends in relations between diverse cultures and religions, the Forum will feature announcements of new initiatives and project-specific working sessions.
- Youth leaders representing youth networks and councils from around the world will be invited to share their experience in bridging relations between communities in the West and those in predominantly Muslim countries.
- A number of Forum sessions will be youth focused.
- Among them, one will deal with intercultural and interreligious youth exchanges. This working group will highlight ongoing intercultural and interreligious programs for youth, particularly between the US, Europe and OIC countries.
- The session will place emphasis on projects that have been led by civil society organizations and that can be replicated, especially by participating

youth networks and youth councils. The working group will address some of the challenges to such work, how to scale up these initiatives and how to ensure such programs reach youth in more remote regions or segments of the population.

- Another session will focus on training the next generation of peace builders. It will discuss youth training programs that help young people and youth networks to serve as bridge-builders in the areas of conflict resolution, intercultural education, and youth service for peace. The initiative will focus on how these training programs can be become more available to youth networks, and how such program scan reach those that more in need of such training.
  
- In order to support these initiatives, the Alliance is establishing an AoC Youth Solidarity Fund. This Fund will provide modest financial support to youth-led projects that contribute to the AoC's implementation plan and further the AoC's objectives.

Dear Friends

- It is often said that young people are important because they are the leaders of the future. I think they are important because of what they do and what they can achieve today.
  
- As far as I have understood, you have already carried out an impressive preparatory work for the Alliance's Forum with your "Youth for the

Alliance of Civilizations initiative”. I thank you for your efforts but allow the Alliance some time to carefully analyze your interesting suggestions and recommendations.

- Anyway I am sure that your input can help shape our program of work in ways that will make us useful to young people. You are the ones who can tell us whether what we intend to do really meets your needs and objectives. You are the ones who can partner with the Alliance and other stakeholders to make a difference in youth’s lives.
  
- I firmly believe that small changes in circumstances can produce big shifts in behavior. This is why I refuse all kinds of fatalisms, a mood most radicals are quite fond of, and why I cheer joint efforts, common projects and shared initiatives.
  
- We face global challenges for which we need a global response. There is no room for isolated or unilateral attitudes.
  
- Let’s go forward hand in hand.

Thank you.