

Informal Thematic Debate

of the General Assembly

“Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: obstacles and
opportunities”

Opening remarks by

JORGE SAMPAIO

UN High Representative for the
Alliance of Civilizations

New York
May, 11, 2007

Madam President of the General Assembly, Sheika Haya Rashed
Aikhalifa
Excellencies

- First of all, I would like to thank the President of the General Assembly, Her Excellency Haya Rashed Al Khalifa, for inviting me to speak at this informal thematic debate on “Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: obstacles and opportunities”.

- I am very pleased to have the opportunity, just two weeks after the Secretary-General appointed me as his High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations to be among you and to take part in such a timely and important debate.

- Today I am here to listen rather than to talk, to take notes rather than to make points, to learn about your thoughts, worries and wishes rather than to present a final outline of my own vision and strategy.
- But first and foremost I am here today to stress that in my new capacity as the High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations I am entirely at your disposal and that I will spare no efforts to carry this project successfully.
- I am very much aware, as all of you are, of the overall difficult situation we face today in the challenge for Peace and I will refrain from taking any premature attitude that could unduly raise false expectations.
- However I do 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.
- This is why I also do think that we must 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 prediction of the “clash of civilizations” only deepens and entrenches these trends.

- To subscribe to the view of the clash of civilizations is somewhat 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. It would mean that political problems can not be solved.

- That is why there is an urgent need to help developing the conditions for improved intercultural relations and to reject this dreadful prediction.

- Therefore, please count on my restless efforts to lead our project, to bring in energy and visibility, and to give voice to it!

*

Excellencies

Dear Friends

- The issues that this Assembly has been discussing over the past two days are of critical importance to the world today – and are at the heart of the Alliance of Civilizations initiative.
- As I have told you at the very beginning I do not intend here today to make definite statements.
- Having just been appointed, I am still examining the Draft Plan of Action kindly forwarded to me by the Secretariat.
- I am still in a process of assembling all the pieces of this huge puzzle since I really think that a bottom up approach is crucial in order to avoid working at cross-purposes and wasting opportunities.

- But of course in order to map out a sustainable strategy aimed at reinforcing unity, coherence and purpose-oriented action, this bottom up approach has to be combined with a top-down view of the challenges we are facing.
- Therefore, for the time being I will be glad to share with you two initial thoughts.
- First thought: a first glance at **the Alliance of Civilizations**
- As I see it, the Alliance is a true global political initiative aimed at promoting a sustainable dialogue among worldwide civilizations.
- We must acknowledge that many political conflicts the world is facing today are underpinned by intercultural and inter-religious tensions.
- As the Alliance of Civilizations High-level Group report establishes, what is at stake in these conflicts is not religion or culture themselves, but the ways in which cultural identity

- or religious beliefs are often exploited in pursuit of political ends.
- Intercultural tensions around sensitive issues have the potential of inflaming passions and can act as lightning rods for expressions of anger and resentment. These, in turn, can have widespread political repercussions.
 - Conversely, global political realities have an impact on intercultural relations at community level as many peoples' views of others are shaped by global conflicts and perceived injustices occurring at an international level.
 - It is important, therefore, to develop a better understanding of the interaction between the world of politics, on the one hand, and cultural and religious factors, on the other. And it is crucial that this understanding is reflected in political decision-making and global diplomatic efforts.
 - Let me add that even if the Middle East with all the extremely difficult problems at stake there is obviously an important priority of the Alliance, we must take a much broader

viewpoint and work towards bringing closer all civilizations throughout the world.

- The point is that in my view the emergence of the contemporary trend towards extremism is not a specific problem of the relations between Western and Muslim societies. It affects also other societies worldwide.

- We have also to keep in mind that prevention and long term perspectives as well as a true global worldwide approach request from us an effort to anticipate future challenges and to prevent tensions and new divides.
- Therefore let us also simply keep a careful and attentive eye on all different peoples, cultures and civilizations around the world. Let us simply not forget that eventually security and peace are indivisible and that they are a vital need for all. Let us work together for a fairer, more tolerant and peaceful world.
- Second thought: **My task as I see it.**
- All these objectives can only be achieved by building strong partnerships among key players at the levels of government, international organizations and agencies, civil society and the private sector.
- The Alliance of Civilizations can play an important role in facilitating and fostering these partnerships – and this will be one of my key priorities in the coming months.

- These partnerships are absolutely critical to build momentum for the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Report drafted by the high level group.

- Another key point is indeed the political dimension of the Alliance.

- Governments should be consistent in their support for democratic processes, the rule of Law, Human Rights and international Law.

- Establishing genuine dialogue among nations requires a common understanding of international human rights principles and a universal commitment to their full and consistent application.

- This is also important in dealing with the tensions that arise at the intersection of politics and religion.

- In my view, we must always oppose those who claim that religion – or that any particular religion – is itself a problem to be solved. But we should also oppose those who use religion for their own political purposes.

- Instead, we must call upon and provide platforms to those who can act as forces of moderation and help build bridges between communities in times of heightened cross-cultural tensions.

- Above all, we must recognize that cross-cultural dialogue is an essential yet insufficient means toward our shared goals of peace. What is required is practical action that can make a difference in people's lives and that can influence people's worldviews.

- It is with this in mind that I welcomed and accepted the Secretary-General's appointment.

- By working together, we can break the cycle of misunderstanding, resentment and violence. We can help restore trust among communities and nations and we can help reduce the levels of cross-cultural tension.
- Let us join our efforts and work together in order to turn the Alliance into commitments and commitments these into achievements.

Many thanks