



ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

Address by Ms. Louise Arbour, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the occasion of the Madrid Alliance of Civilizations Forum

16 January 2008

Deputy Prime Minister of Spain

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Managing cultural diversity is both a challenge and an imperative particularly against the backdrop and speed of globalization which is creating migratory flows and information exchanges of unprecedented scale and span.

But it is not inherent incompatibility among cultures that have erected barriers of mutual suspicion among civilizations, people of diverse origins, and gender. Rather these barriers have been erected by dominant groups which have historically been able to perpetuate their supremacy and preserve their privileges through the denying of basic rights to those they deemed to be culturally, racially and socially inferior.

Whether by design or culpable omission, the worst manifestations of inflammatory and discriminatory practices have triggered and may continue to engender large-scale atrocities.

Almost invariably retrospective, our revulsion and horror at these tragedies have yet to eliminate the ingrained suspicions against the perceived "differences" that ignite hatred. And invariably, the need to find workable models of coexistence in an increasingly interconnected world has become stronger and more pressing.

Yet, while references to a so-called clash of civilizations evoke international tensions and conflicts, relations among diverse groups within a country may ultimately pose the biggest challenge to managing difference in today's fluid environment. According to UNDP, the world's 192 countries contain some 5,000 ethnic groups. Two thirds of these countries have at least one substantial minority—an ethnic or religious group that makes up at least 10% of the population. Often the empowering quality of such diversity is reflected in the harmonious and prosperous coexistence of different communities. But at times, diversity is said to be inimical to the *raison d'être* of a unitary State, or to communal cohesion, or to the values of a State's majority.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is undeniable that, despite our best efforts at fostering understanding among cultures and at protecting diversity, values and interests remain largely in the eyes of the beholders who may not always pursue them with fairness and measure. Even within the confines of a relatively homogeneous culture, reasonable people disagree

over issues that speak to the core of their individual values or their perceptions of identity and interests.

Although we should never be oblivious to such deeply held feelings and convictions, their subjectivity-- and possibly partisan limitations--makes them unlikely parameters to understand and to satisfactorily deal with diversity.

In contrast, universal human rights norms and standards--which are anchored in what unites all of us, that is our common humanity, needs and aspirations--provide impartial guidance for managing and protecting diversity in all its aspects and at all times. The very foundation of freedom, justice and peace rests on the recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human rights family as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration emphasizes that whatever their nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, language, or any other status, all people are entitled to exercise their fundamental freedoms and human rights, without discrimination, and without any limitations other than those accepted under international law. The fact that the Declaration has inspired Constitutional principles in at least 90 States testifies as to its boundless appeal and enduring relevance. Moreover, all States have ratified at least one of the core nine international human rights treaties that flesh out the Declaration's framework, and 80 per cent have ratified four or more.

And yet some have called into question the very universality of the principles expressed in the Declaration. Many voice this criticism in the mistaken belief that universal principles are inimical to the promotion and expression of pluralistic diversity or cultural specificity, or market forces. Some of these sceptics argue that civil and political rights—as articulated in the Declaration—belong solely to western traditions and agendas, and are not as widely shared as their advocates would make us believe. For their part, critics coming from liberal economic perspectives are wary of the Declaration's economic and social rights which they regard as obstacles bound to hamper free market practices and or impose cumbersome obligations on States. Not only do these positions undermine obligations that States have freely accepted to uphold, they also perpetuate suspicions among communities. As the Alliance of Civilization High-level Group noted in its report:

Polarization between communities grows when universal human rights are defended – or perceived to be defended - selectively. Therefore, establishing genuine dialogue among nations requires a common understanding of international human rights principles and a universal commitment to their full and consistent application.

A springboard for that dialogue is offered by the year-long campaign marking the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched last month. I invite the participants to the Alliance of Civilizations forum to take advantage of this opportunity and to engage their colleagues, partners and interlocutors in the celebration of the Declaration's spirit and in the universal implementation of its letter.

Excellencies,

The High-level Group stressed how poverty eradication, prevention of extremism and good governance are crucial to the equitable and harmonious conduct of both international relations and domestic policies.

Today's worst challenges to human rights, tolerance and cooperation among civilizations no longer come uniquely from strong authoritarian regimes with highly

centralized power structures, pervasive propaganda machines and intrusive security institutions. The threats from weak, fragmented and deficient States, as well as violent non state-actors, equally undermine peace domestically and internationally. Such threats can neither be contained simply by disdain nor can they be eradicated only by force. Above all, they cannot be confronted without cooperation.

In the undertaking of building bridges and cooperation among peoples of different cultures, varied beliefs and diverse origins, the Alliance of Civilizations forum has identified a number of already active collaborators and potential partners, such as international organizations, religious leaders, civil society, the media and the youth. I particularly commend the forum's innovative proposals of creating a clearinghouse of media literacy education, as well a rapid response media mechanism. This latter initiative can help defuse tensions in times of crisis through the mobilization of influential spokespersons and media outlets. Appeals to reason may help prevent degeneration in the quality of the discourse and steer it back to contents and tones worthy of public debate.

Dear Colleagues,

Shared rights and common goals do not diminish the diversity that characterizes the international community as a whole, each nation and indeed increasingly most social environments. We have multiple affiliations that we are ready to acknowledge and wish to maintain. We should celebrate the diversity of cultures, beliefs and outlooks as positive forces that enable us to confront and find solutions for the challenges of this 21st century – those of inequality and poverty, conflict and injustice.

The Universal Declaration is the most translated document in the world. Since 2008 is also the International Year of Languages, we can perhaps note that despite the multiple forms in which it may appear the Declaration contains one simple and strong message: tolerance and respect for one another. This may also be the common message, delivered in a multitude of cultural and social contexts and through a variety of partners and actors by the Alliance of Civilizations. The resolution of the Human rights Council which recognizes the valuable efforts of the Alliance of Civilization and invites its High Representative, Jorge Sampaio, to address the High-level segment of the Council's seventh session in March, offers an additional opportunity to highlight our common message and the links between the work of the Alliance and the promotion and protection of human rights.

This link between the HRC and the Alliance of Civilizations will be magnificently represented in the work of art currently in progress at the Palais des Nations in Geneva. Celebrated Spanish artist, Miguel Barcelo is presently deploying his amazing talent as part of the renovation of Room XX at the Palais which will be dedicated, with the generosity of the Government of Spain, to the Human Rights Council and the Alliance of Civilizations. Nothing could better represent the spirit which animates our efforts to reinforce, through law and through the arts, our common humanity.

Thank you.