



ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

Speech by the President of the Government at the inauguration of the First Alliance of Civilizations Forum

MADRID, 15 JANUARY 2008

In September 2004, during the UN General Assembly, I proposed the launching of an Alliance of Civilizations. This initiative aimed to correct the negative drift being experienced at that time regarding mutual perceptions between the Western and Arab-Islamic worlds, which could affect the peace and stability of the entire world. Its objective was to avoid the fulfilment of a predicted clash of civilizations, by promoting security, understanding, tolerance, and mutual respect in a globalised world.

This proposal quickly had a great impact. It generated a hopeful consensus; it created expectations around something that could be done, something that should be done; and it obtained the immediate co-sponsorship of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whom I would especially like to thank for being in Madrid with us today.

In July 2005, the Secretary-General of the United Nations made the initiative his own, and constituted a High-Level Group of 20 leaders specialised in a variety of fields, from different regions, with a mandate to present a report containing proposals and recommendations.

In November 2006, in Istanbul, the Group published its report. In April 2007, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon named as his High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations the illustrious former President of Portugal, Jorge Sampaio.

And today, a little more than three years after the initiative was launched, we are here in Madrid inaugurating the First Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations. And there are many of us.

There is the Secretary-General of the United Nations, there are Heads of State and of Government, Ministers, business leaders from the North and the South, foundations, religious leaders, opinion-makers, young people, educational experts. The Alliance's Group of Friends has been growing steadily. Today, more than 80 States and international organizations form part of the Group, which constitutes the clearest expression of the political support that the initiative has inspired.

Why? Why has the Alliance of Civilizations managed to have such a powerful impact?

Because it has come to fill a gap. Because it has identified a real problem—managing diversity in a globalised world—that we had no adequate political instruments for fighting against. Because it has put the spotlight of international political attention directly on an issue that until now had been dealt with more tangentially, or with a focus that was more cultural or academic than political.

A problem that we have seen worsened by severe political conflicts, be they in the Balkans, the Middle East, Afghanistan, or Sudan. And one that extremist and radical sectors try to manipulate for their own interests, invoking supposedly insolvable religious or cultural conflicts which they aim to utilise in order to justify an ideology that preaches confrontation and hatred, and whose instruments are terrorism and the murder of innocent people.

To face these new challenges of the 21st century, we need to forge new tools and instruments.

The Alliance does not aim to substitute for, or replace, those decisions that only States, that only the parties in a conflict, can make. What it does aim to do is to facilitate and accompany the process. It does aim to mobilise those great majorities of the population who want to, and know how to, live in peace. It does want to help to counteract the political utilization of diversity. It does want to contribute to isolating extremist and intolerant discourses on the part of those who try to utilise religion or culture for political purposes. It does aspire to build bridges that can help us to manage the differences existing in the world, particularly those linked to religious or cultural issues. It does aspire to generate a positive dynamic of collaboration wherever there are multiple factors that could provoke a negative dynamic of confrontation.

How can we do this?

By proposing practical political recommendations that can be applied by civil society as a whole, in the four fields—education, youth, migration, and the media—identified in the High-Level Group Report. The fact is, if the Alliance of Civilizations is a concept of a strategic, global nature, it will only be a success, it will only last over time, if we are able to give it a practical, specific content. If we manage to articulate it via specific policy actions. Showing that there are practical means of collaboration between the Islamic world and the Western world, which belie the supposed paradigm of inevitable confrontation between civilizations and cultures.

The advocacy of States and international organizations is key to carrying out this task. They play an essential role in generating political actions.

The Alliance will become consolidated to the extent that States are able to integrate it into their national policies, to the extent that the objectives it pursues are translated into guiding principles for their domestic and foreign policies.

Last September in New York, the High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations—who is here today and whom I would like to thank most especially for the great work that he is doing—proposed the possibility of Governments elaborating National Strategies or National Plans for the Alliance, centred on the four thematic areas identified.

The Government of Spain, as a country firmly committed to the initiative, took up this call from the very first in a highly positive manner. I believe that everyone is well aware of our historical, geographic, cultural, and security motives for doing so. Our efforts and our interest are also due to considerations of political coherence, since Spain is a co-sponsor of the initiative.

Therefore, last Friday, 11 January, Spain's Council of Ministres approved a National Alliance of Civilizations Plan. With this, the Government aims to pursue the specific

objectives of the Alliance on a national scale, integrating them into its foreign policy, its cooperative programmes, and its internal sectoral policies.

During the present legislature, the Government has already passed major legislative initiatives designed to promote the objectives of the Alliance. But we want to do more, and this Plan will help us to give greater impetus to what we have already undertaken, and strengthen these measures in the future. We aim to rouse all of Spain's public administrations and civil society, as well as to spur on other international actors.

The National Plan is inspired by the principles and objectives included in the High-Level Group Report, concentrating its lines of action on four major areas:

- Those aimed at favouring mutual understanding and appreciation for diversity;
- Those aimed at promoting civic values and a culture of peace;
- Those having as their priority improving the integration and training of immigrants, with a special emphasis on young people; and
- Those aimed at promoting and disseminating the Alliance of Civilizations.

These are approximately sixty specific short-, medium-, and long-term actions.

With the aim of giving coherence to the Plan and to promote putting it into effect, the Government will name a National Coordinator who will report to the President of the Government.

I would like to take advantage of this opportunity to invite the member countries in the Group of Friends to continue along this path, which to my view will be the one able to settle the Alliance of Civilizations on a solid foundation.

For their part, international organizations also have a fundamental role in consolidating the Alliance. It is my desire that the Alliance may become a horizontal instrument within the framework of the great United Nations family, mobilising and supporting so much that is already being done in the thematic areas identified in the High-Level Group Report.

Ladies and gentleman:

The work of States and international organizations is irreplaceable. However, it will be difficult for us to succeed in this endeavour if we do not also actively involve civil society as a whole. Young people, the media, opinion-makers, the business world, academia, universities, and religious circles.

This First Alliance of Civilizations Forum wishes to point the way in this direction. And therefore, I am pleased to see the large contingents from different sectors of society here at this meeting in Madrid.

We have ahead of us a day and a half of intense work. With three plenary sessions and eight working sessions on issues of the greatest importance. I hope, moreover, that this Forum may serve as a framework for presenting specific projects and initiatives of different sizes and scopes. We want the Forum to serve as a wide-ranging sounding board so that all of the actors involved may be able to gauge what they are doing to further the management of interculturality.

The Alliance of Civilizations aims to create a space for political action that will contribute to mobilising commitment and to fighting lack of communication and the generation of negative mutual perceptions that could be manipulated by extremist or radical groups. A space in which each one of the different international actors can do their part towards building a more stable, more just, and richer world.

I hope that each one of us is able to assume their quota of responsibility in order to move forward with the principles shared by those who are meeting here in Madrid, proceeding from all corners of our marvellously diverse world. We are participating in an exercise based on the idea of shared responsibility. The Alliance of Civilizations Forum is called to be the annual expression of that responsibility, an opportunity to take stock of our projects so that we may continue advancing together.