



ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

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UNITED NATIONS HIGH REPRESENTATIVE
FOR THE ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

*Istanbul Center Awards Ceremony
Oglethorpe University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA
Art & Essay Contest on the Theme: "Who's My Neighbor",*

March 5, 2010

Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen
Young Creative People

I should like to thank the Istanbul Center and the Georgia Department of Education for inviting the Alliance to co-sponsor this contest aimed to spur the thinking of young people on the theme of “Who’s My Neighbor.”

Let me express my appreciation to the contest’s partners and co-sponsors from local universities, media, NGOs and other civil society, the Honorary Consulate General of Turkey for Georgia, as well as the British Consulate General and the Consulate Generals of Germany, Israel, and Switzerland.

In my view, this wide-ranging partnership is symbolic of the efforts of the UN Alliance of Civilizations to bring together governments, civil society, and educational institutions to bridge the gaps between different cultural groups. Efforts deployed by Georgia and by the Istanbul Center are also emblematic of our focus on practical projects that bring people together from host and migrant communities.

The work of the Alliance is done through practical projects in its four areas of action - Education, Migration, Media, and Youth – aimed at enhancing trust and respect among people within and between diverse communities.

To give a few examples: the Alliance’s Youth Solidarity Fund provides support to a range of grassroots projects that facilitate genuine bridge building between youth from different cultural backgrounds. The Rapid Response Media Mechanism offers a diversity of expert voices to the media to provide constructive opinions on issues that threaten to divide communities. The new Dialogue Café network to be launched in Rio is aimed to connect people in global conversations showing that people have more in common with each other than divisive differences and that given the opportunity they will explore their common interests and spark collaborations”. And in order to help the next generation develop the skills they need to operate in an increasingly multicultural world, the Alliance is developing online resources providing invaluable information to policy makers, educators, and NGOs on media literacy education, education about diverse religions and beliefs, and good practices in the integration of migrants.

However, we can achieve far more by stimulating and catalyzing projects that are created by local groups who can come up with creative means to bring people together from different groups.

NGOs, corporations, state and local governments are more attuned to success in fostering mutual understanding, confidence and respect among peoples of different cultural traditions because of their in-depth contacts with local key individuals and knowledge of local issues.

This is why we are encouraging countries to develop strategies at the national and local level with the help of partners from various sectors to conceive, plan and implement projects that bring people together and reduce cultural divides – the *raison d’être* of the Alliance of Civilizations.

Ladies and gentlemen, globalization and migration brings together different cultural communities who may previously not have had much interaction with each other. Interaction of different groups can be a source of friction and often of conflict. But cultural diversity can also result in cross-fertilization and success stories of people interacting in mutual respect and harmony. Cultural diversity can spark innovation, stimulate creativity and boost the economy. Indeed, Atlanta, Georgia, and the United States have seen this first-hand.

The Istanbul Center's efforts to promote better understanding and closer relations between the Turkish, American, and other communities in Atlanta and the Southeastern United States are inspiring in this regard.

In my mind, the value of the Istanbul Center's annual Art and Essay Contest is in stimulating young people to think positively and creatively about cultural diversity and the bridging of cultures.

Through this contest and in your future life, it is important to understand the differences between you and your neighbors – in your looks, origins, religions, cuisine, and dress, for example. However, the commonalities of your dreams, fears, and aspirations are also important to explore because that will determine the shared future that you both have to inhabit. You will soon learn that the differences are often less important than the commonalities of love for family, fear of the unknown, the sense of dignity and the aspiration for a better future.

To the young people – the emerging global generation -- gathered here today, I say: you can go towards the futility of prejudice and hate through building physical and mental walls. Or you can explore the fruitful nature of cultural diversity by breaking down the barriers and discovering the differences --- and commonalities – of your neighbors.

In this busy world, we are sometimes not aware of our neighbors and often do not understand them and their ways. Even if we are aware of our neighbors and understand and tolerate them, we are still scared of breaking down the barriers and build shared spaces. But only shared spaces enable us to respectfully work with each other towards greater harmony and building a better future for all.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Alliance of Civilizations emphasizes exchanges as a practical effort at bring cultures together. The awards of the trips to Turkey for the contest winners and educators presents a powerful way to learn about yourself, experience another culture first-hand, and engage in the dismantling of stereotypes and prejudices. Perhaps in the future, Turkish school children will have an opportunity to take part in a similar contest and visit the United States and Atlanta.

Thanks for your support and participation.