



Group of Friends Meeting
New York, 22 June 2009

Summary Report

Overview

The Alliance of Civilizations Group of Friends met at Heads of Missions level in New York on 22 June 2009.

In the absence of the High Representative, who had been advised not to travel to New York for health reasons, the meeting was chaired by Mr. Iqbal Riza, Special Adviser to the UNSG.

Delegates first watched a video message from President Sampaio, who highlighted the achievements of the Istanbul Forum, and presented both the Second Report on the Alliance's activities from May 2008 to May 2009 and the Second Implementation Plan, which had been transmitted to the Secretary General of the United Nations during the same week. He also made a plea for greater financial support from members.

The meeting allowed for preliminary reactions to the assessments made and orientations given by the High Representative in his two documents, it being understood that it would be for Ministers, in September 2009, to give their comments and recommendations, after a more thorough analysis of these papers. The situation of the Trust Fund and the 2009 Budget was further elaborated upon by the Secretariat and gave rise to a few comments and pledges.

Delegates regretted the absence of the High Representative and wished him a speedy recovery.

In the course of the discussions, as has become the practice, many delegations also commented on national strategies and other initiatives, meant to give effect to the Alliance's objectives.

Reporting on the steps taken by his Turkish colleague as well as by himself, the Ambassador of Spain took stock on the preparatory work towards a General Assembly Resolution on the Alliance of Civilizations. Both the principle of a Resolution and the consultation work carried so far received a broad support and a few words of caution.

By way of preamble, like the High Representative himself, a number of Delegations briefly got back to the Istanbul Forum, which had been the subject matter of a de-briefing session of the Group of Friends on 22 April, and praised its organization and impact.

Further to fresh statements by the representatives of the countries concerned and in line with President Sampaio's annotated agenda, it was noted that the next Fora would be organized by Brazil (2010), Qatar (2111) and Austria (2112).

At the closure, Helena Barroco, Special Adviser to the High Representative, thanked delegations for the many stimulating comments and suggestions, which she would convey to President Sampaio, together with their kind words and best wishes. She had noted a number of initiatives announced by individual countries. She invited the members of the GOF to give a big hand to departing Ambassador İlkin of Turkey, who had played such a crucial role in the first years of the Alliance.

Specifics

1. The Istanbul Forum and future fora

In his message, President Sampaio stressed that the Istanbul Forum had been a huge success, not least because of the work carried out during the journey from Madrid to Istanbul and the co-ownership of many partners. Several members of the Group of Friends said that the second Forum had notably demonstrated the value of the Alliance's network as a fertile space for promoting creative approaches. It had been 'vibrant', 'a barometer of the level of interest' of the Alliance's work in civil society and academia, which 'confirmed the validity and the force of the Initiative'. It was further noted that the well-organized Forum coincided with a very important visit to Turkey.

The Delegate of Brazil presented the first steps taken towards the organization of the Rio Forum and thanked the organizers of the previous events for their invaluable advice. The perspective of meeting in Rio de Janeiro was hailed as an event that 'was going to carry the spirit and the work of the Alliance even further'. One delegation stressed that the Americas had a lot to share in terms of cross-cultural relationships. The offers of Qatar and Austria, duly registered, were seen as evidence that the process was gaining a longer term perspective.

2. The Second Annual Report and the Second Implementation Plan

In his message, the High Representative offered a vision of the major achievements of the Alliance so far: the rapid enlargement of the GoF, the dense platform of synergies with partners, the recognition of a key role on the global governance agenda, the practical initiatives. Among these, national and regional strategies were particularly important, as all countries face the challenge of good governance of cultural diversity. Turning to the future, he presented the second Implementation Plan first and foremost as a consolidation plan, aimed at strengthening the credibility of the Alliance and its ability to deliver. The Alliance, he said, now appears as a main catalyst and facilitator for innovative projects aimed at reducing polarization, as well as a major bridge-builder and convener, connecting people and organizations devoted to promoting trust and understanding between diverse communities, particularly – but not exclusively – between Muslim and Western societies. The Alliance must build on that and it must secure its sustainability.

The message was very well received. While reserving their detailed comments on the documents for a later occasion, most intervening delegations explicitly confirmed their interest and support for the initiative, as it was developing. It was said that the Alliance, which has ‘now become a major global initiative’, was ‘on the right track’, ‘had set out useful direction for a collective effort of overcoming cross-cultural polarization’ and could claim ‘meteoric achievements’. It was stressed that bridging divides had become very challenging, as prevailing misunderstandings between various faiths and cultures appear to be aggravated in the wake of several crises. The point was further made that the Alliance’s efforts, which contribute to strengthening the vision of bridges between people, cultures and religions, help empower moderates in our societies. The hope was expressed that, through its diversity, the Alliance would maintain an element of focus to counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism, or would not lose sight of its original objective.

Many participants referred to the work under way or recently completed on respective national strategies and/or supported regional initiatives. They include Algeria, Argentina, Austria, Montenegro, Kazakhstan, Egypt, the Czech Republic, the Russian Federation, Portugal, and Slovenia.

As the ambassador of Turkey in his opening statement, a number of speakers underlined the importance of the AoC projects, in particular the RRMM, Youth activities, and the new projects launched at the Istanbul Forum, such as the fellowship program, ‘Plural+’ or ‘Restore Trust, Rebuild Bridges’. One delegation felt that more attention should be paid to a good coordination between new initiatives and the Alliance’s groundwork.

Addressing the issue of structures, one delegation insisted that better use should be made of focal points meetings, adding that high-level meetings should not be held unless there is a specific, urgent need for them. Another suggested the appointment of civil society actors as goodwill ambassadors of the Alliance.

3. The budget and the trust fund

In his video message, the High Representative drew attention to the fact that, while the Alliance has recently grown a lot in terms of membership, ambition and commitments, it has stagnated in terms of available resources, with much of the funding coming from a very few countries. Sustainability was a real concern. This situation had to be reversed. Friends should take real ownership of the initiative and provide it with the modest but steady resources that were needed. The Director of the Alliance’s Secretariat recalled that the 2009 indicative budget, which was a document of the meeting, foresaw core expenditures in the order of 3.3 Million USD, a third of them not covered at that stage with corresponding resources. Since the call of the Secretary General, early last May, a few countries had made contributions but more was necessary to balance the budget and secure the appropriate cash-flow.

Several delegations declared their intention to make a contribution, in some of the cases described as symbolic or modest, later in the year and to plan for regular contributions in the future. They include Algeria, Afghanistan, Brazil, Luxembourg, Kazakhstan, and Tunisia. Spain announced that ‘a substantive contribution’ would soon be forthcoming. The Secretariat mentioned the significant support provided by the United Kingdom to the RRMM’s extension and the secondment of a staff member by Switzerland.

4. Towards a General Assembly Resolution

The Ambassador of Spain recalled the genesis of the idea of a General Assembly Resolution, meant to provide additional political backing to the fast developing Alliance. The idea had been supported all along by the High Representative, whom as confirmed in his video message, naturally left it to countries to take the necessary steps. The Ambassador then reported on the consultations that both he and the Ambassador of Turkey had conducted in previous weeks on a set of ideas that would be reflected in a draft Resolution. Consultations with a majority of GoF countries showed that the tabling of a draft Resolution was widely felt as timely and useful. There was a clear preference for a short, general, non-controversial text that would be adopted by consensus. There further was a strong wish that the flexibility of the Alliance, in order to address different situations in different ways, be preserved. On that basis, a first text had been put together and recently communicated to all delegations, as a basis for further consultations.

Delegations taking the floor on that issue confirmed that a political backing by the General Assembly was both appropriate and timely. Many offered to actively engage in the drafting of a Resolution, to co-sponsor a text and/or to work for its adoption, whenever the time comes. They include the following: the Czech Republic, Italy, Kazakhstan, Luxembourg, Portugal, Qatar, and Yemen.

5. Announcement of Initiatives

The delegations of Italy, Canada and IOM pointed to a new initiative they were developing in New York with the Alliance on ‘the Inter-Ethnic City: Management and Policies for a Better Integration of Migrants’ (28 September 09). Algeria referred to the upcoming second Pan-African Cultural Festival. Austria announced a Symposium on ‘Identity and Participation: Cross-Cultural and Muslim Youth’ to be held in Vienna on 29 – 30 June. Portugal mentioned the organization of an event on Youth and Politics, in October, in the margins of the work of the General Assembly’s Third Committee.