



THE PRESIDENT  
OF THE  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

20 March 2007

Excellency,

I have the honour to invite you to the third informal thematic debate of the Sixty first Session of the General Assembly, on *Civilization and the Challenge for Peace: obstacles and opportunities*. The debate will be held on 10 and 11 May 2007, in New York.

The main objective of the debate is to unravel the reasons behind the increasing level of mistrust among people of different religions and cultures; and, to discuss the relationships between cultural and religious differences and conflicts.

The meeting will bring together Member States, a number of prominent intellectuals, representatives from non-governmental organizations, the private sector and civil society drawn from all over the world, with expertise in religion, politics, literature, science and the humanities.

The informal thematic debate will consist of four inter-active panel discussions on: *Respect for Cultural Diversity as a prerequisite for Dialogue; Religion in Contemporary Society; the Responsibility of the Media; and, Civilizations and the Challenge for Global Peace and Security*.

For your ease of reference, I am enclosing a background note and the provisional programme for the thematic debate.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Haya Rashed Al Khalifa". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Haya Rashed Al Khalifa

All Permanent Representatives and  
Permanent Observers to the United Nations  
New York

# **CIVILIZATIONS AND THE CHALLENGE FOR PEACE: OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

## **Introduction**

The main objective of the debate is to unravel the reasons behind the increasing level of mistrust among people of different religions and cultures; and, to discuss the relationships between cultural and religious differences and conflicts.

This thematic debate will build upon the various initiatives undertaken at the United Nations to promote human dignity and peaceful relations among nations, including through a genuine dialogue among civilizations and religions.

The meeting intends to go beyond mere gestures of intent to formulate tangible ideas that can catalyze dialogue between and within different cultures and civilizations. It will attempt to contribute towards a vision that can foster pluralism, mutual understanding and equal participation, rather than discrimination and marginalization. In order to achieve a productive outcome the debate will have to ask how cultural and religious differences have exacerbated levels of mistrust.

Along side Member States, the meeting will bring together, a number of prominent intellectuals, representatives from non-governmental organizations, the private sector and civil society, drawn from all over the world, with expertise in religion, politics, literature, science and the humanities.

## **Panel Discussions**

The debate will involve four main Panel Discussions.

### **1. Respect for Cultural Diversity as a prerequisite for Dialogue**

In this era of globalization, the challenge before us is to ensure that cultural diversity becomes a source of fecund and collective enrichment and not the basis for misperception and conflict.

Respect for all cultures and religions, taking into consideration their specificities, is a prerequisite for a productive dialogue. The challenge today is to ensure that cultural diversity leads to fruitful exchanges that are beneficial to all of humanity.

Today, migration represents a major phenomenon in our global world. It presents considerable challenges, but also has the potential to create mutually beneficial opportunities for greater cultural and religious interaction.

Diversity is now a prevailing feature of modern societies. In order to address common challenges confronting humanity, our collective effort should focus on drawing people together rather than on what divides us.

More emphasis should thus be placed on promoting universal values, respect for human rights and dignity, including the collective heritage of humankind. Modern technology can facilitate greater exchange of ideas, which could contribute towards bolstering dialogue among and within cultures and civilizations. In this context, it is important to protect and encourage creativity, support cultural endeavors, artistic expression in all fields and to give room for cultural dissemination and exchange.

## **2. Religion in Contemporary Society**

Religious fundamentalism poses a serious threat to peaceful relations and understanding among peoples and nations. The challenge today is to ensure that religious freedoms and beliefs - fundamental human rights - do not contribute to the rejection of those who are different, social domination, or even violence.

In a world of increasing diversity where more and more peoples of different religious and cultural backgrounds are living together, it is crucial that social policies encourage religious and cultural interactions in a free, respectful and tolerant environment. The discussions should emphasize programmes at local and multilateral levels promoting knowledge of and interaction between religions of different backgrounds and beliefs.

Such programmes should aim to enhance mutual understanding and emphasize a culture of peace to support harmonious relationships among peoples and uphold human dignity for all.

## **3. The Responsibility of the Media**

The media could have an extremely important role to play in the promotion of peace. Information technologies allow events in one part of the world to be instantly beamed into our living rooms. The impact the media can now have upon our perceptions of Others has reach an unprecedented scale.

The right to freedom of opinion and expression also carries responsibilities. The media should strive to broadcast a balanced view of all cultures by tackling stereotypes and prejudice and promoting tolerance and mutual understanding. By focusing on the real challenges facing humanity, in an objective and transparent manner the media can also contribute towards fostering peaceful relations among peoples and nations.

#### **4. Civilizations and the Challenge for Global Peace and Security**

Today we are facing multi-faceted challenge that has an increasing bearing upon political, economic, environmental, scientific, cultural, and religious discourses. The response to these challenges requires a vision based on dialogue, and shared human values and ideals.

Religious and cultural differences have increasingly become part of the everyday vocabulary used to understand many conflicts. This has led some to believe that a “clash of civilizations” is taking place, or is inevitable. How can a genuine dialogue, based on the respect for other cultures and universal human values, help to overcome misconceptions and prejudice?

The way peoples relate to each other on a daily basis shapes and is a reflection of our tolerance and respect for others. More inclusive education about the world and its peoples can promote these concepts by raising awareness of differences and promoting common human values.

Laying the foundation for global peace and collective security requires concerted efforts bringing together expertise and capacities at the local, national, regional and international levels. Institutional and policy frameworks that foster greater understanding can form elements of more effective confidence building measures that contribute global peace and security.

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