

United Nations Nations Unies

THE PRESIDENT OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

LE PRESIDENT DE L'ASSEMBLEE GENERALE

18 December 2006

Statement of H.E. Ms. Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa, President of the 61st Session of the General Assembly, at the Informal Briefing on Alliance of Civilizations

Your Excellencies.

I have the honor to welcome to this informal briefing, the Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the Prime Minister of Spain José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, and the Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to this informal briefing of the General Assembly.

It is appropriate that the governments of Spain and Turkey launched the Alliance of Civilizations initiative. Spain and Turkey have for centuries been melting pots of the East and West, and both have been enriched by this diversity.

May I commend the Secretary-General, Kofi Annan for supporting this initiative by establishing the High Level Group. And, allow me also to thank the eminent members of the High Level Group for their extraordinary dedication to prepare their Report.

The High Level Group was given an important mandate: to provide an assessment of emerging threats to international peace and security, and to recommend practical actions to promote peace, harmony and the dignity of humankind among different cultures and traditions.

This mandate emanates from the United Nations Charter itself which commits Member States, I quote:

"to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours." And, "to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security."

End of quote.

This mandate also emanates from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 that strives to liberate humankind from fear and suffering.

As the Report concludes, we live at a time when tensions across cultures have spread beyond the political level into the hearts and minds of populations. That is why we urgently need a global agenda to support greater dialogue among civilizations and cultures.

The diverse composition of the High Level Group is a symbol of the Alliance of Civilizations; an alliance that can be truly beneficial, only if we counter those who would use the politics of difference, for their own ends.

The forces of globalization and mass communication have brought us closer together, and also made us more aware of our differences. However, our common humanity must not be fractured by fear, hatred, mistrust or intolerance.

Rather, the politics of multiculturalism should promote respect, tolerance and mutual understanding. Voltaire epitomized this sentiment when he said;

"I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it"

This principle is one that underpins the Charter. And, this Organization is unique in respecting the right of all nations to voice their opinions.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentleman,

There are currently many important initiatives promoting greater mutual understanding between cultures and religions, through emphasizing the importance of promoting greater mutual respect. I trust that working together towards our common objective, these different processes can be mutually reinforcing.

The main challenge before us all is to ensure a proper balance between our legitimate attachment to our own cultural background, and the need to relate to each other by embracing our differences, so that we can all live in peace and harmony.

The dissemination of the values of tolerance and our common humanity in educational curricula and promoting messages of peace and coexistence in our media will no doubt lead to greater respect for difference. In particular, primary education for all, would give every child a better start in life, the opportunity to fulfill their potential and make a more meaningful contribution to society.

To highlight the importance of these issues and to promote greater dialogue and tolerance among civilizations and cultures, inspired by enlightened ideas of humanity across history, I intend to convene an informal interactive thematic debate of the General Assembly in the summer of 2007.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, we celebrate 600th anniversary of the passing of the philosopher Ibn Khaldun, who belongs to a group of rationalist thinkers in the Arab and Islamic heritage. These intellectual ideas stand in opposition to those ideologues who advocate a closed society, fundamentalism and unilateralism. Ibn Khaldun does not live in the past, he is part of the global intellectual heritage that embodies contemporary human consciousness.

In the context of this heritage, Denis Diderot more than 200 years ago summarised to a large extent the current historical juncture;

"Without the unity of the individual, the moral and the 'poétique', the only alternative for humanity is barbarism"

Our common responsibility, here and now, is to stand up for humanity, morality and peace, in opposition to the forces of violence, fundamentalism and discrimination.

Thank you.