

10 May 2007

**Statement of H.E. Ms. Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa,
President of the 61st Session of the General Assembly,
at the 3rd Informal Thematic Debate of the General Assembly on
“Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: Obstacles and
Opportunities”**

Secretary-General,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,

Allow me, first and foremost, to express my deepest gratitude to all of you for accepting our invitation to participate in this thematic debate on "Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: Obstacles and Opportunities."

Your presence at the United Nations today is momentous, because your different affiliations, perspectives, and intellectual pursuits represent the breadth of human experience and the hopes of many for a brighter future.

This debate is the third of its kind. The first was a thematic debate on development and the second was on gender equality and the empowerment of women. What has compelled us to hold this debate is the desire to understand the realities we live in and analyze more fully the reasons behind the increasing levels of conflict, alienation, extremism, and fear in the world. In doing so, we can lay a solid foundation for a genuine dialogue between cultures and religions and bridge the rift that is on the verge of deepening.

We must ask ourselves: How can we face and overcome the misunderstanding that characterizes the world we live in today and protect our rich heritage? It is our obligation to act quickly to put an end to preconceived ideas and to mutual fears. Only then will we rise above our differences and together build a better future for all.

Friends,

One of the main reasons behind the state of insecurity and instability in this world is a perceived lack of justice: the feeling that one's dignity has been violated; the feeling that the principles and values that have been agreed upon internationally are not applicable to all.

The only means to address this is through more intensive dialogue on two levels in tandem: at the political and diplomatic level, and at the cultural and social. It is important to recognize that culture is not merely a means of coexistence and reconciliation, but also an instrument for development, progress and prosperity.

Fortunately, dialogue among cultures has taken precedence on many foreign policy agendas and has been at the forefront of the United Nations agenda since its inception. In fact, 2001 was devoted to this topic and was named "the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations".

Our meeting today is an extension of this effort and goes hand in hand with the UN Charter that calls for: "respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion".

Friends,

We must put a stop to the misuse of religion in contemporary society, and reject extremist ideologies that severely threaten peace and understanding among nations and peoples.

We must ask ourselves: How is it that wars are waged, injustice is justified and 'the other' is outcast, all in the name of religion? It is absurd and regretful that religion is being abused. This situation must be changed, because all religions share the message of love and brotherhood; these human and spiritual elements remain the essence of all religions.

We must stand together, now more than ever before, and ascribe common meaning to our existence and humanity. This is the prerequisite for peace. This is the responsibility of each and every nation, and each and every citizen. Non-governmental organizations, civil society, and the media all shoulder this responsibility as well.

It is a heavy burden that requires projecting a balanced view of all cultures by rejecting stereotypes and preconceptions, and promoting a spirit of tolerance. Only then will we be able to promote peace amongst all peoples.

We are in the midst of an information revolution where the wealth of knowledge that is at our fingertips is unfathomable. We must see to it that our educational curricula encourage critical and creative thinking that one can apply to the self before engaging with the other; for how can we engage with others, discover their beauty, their similarities, and their differences if we cannot look within ourselves first? This methodology of reflection and self-criticism is the basis for real dialogue.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The leading causes of instability in our world are poverty, disease, armed conflict both within and among states, intolerance and clashes amongst civilizations, cultures and religions. Addressing these challenges requires first the acknowledgement of their existence. Then we can agree on the most effective ways to tackle them in order to achieve global peace and security.

I wish you a fruitful exchange during the next two days. I would like to conclude by thanking everyone that has taken part in supporting this thematic debate and its related events. Allow me to express my deepest appreciation for the support we have received from the governments of Italy, Norway, Denmark and Germany, as well as the "Alliance of Civilizations" initiative, and the Islamic Development Bank.

The cooperation of all these various groups is a reflection of the importance of dialogue. This is what we should always strive for. And, it should be the basis for our future events.

Thank you all..