

22 March 2012

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser,
President of the 66th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Opening of the Interactive Thematic Debate on Fostering
Cross-cultural Understanding for Building Peaceful and Inclusive
Societies**

Your Excellency Mr. Beşir Atalay, Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey,
Your Excellency Mr. Gonzalo de Benito, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Spain,
Your Excellency Dr. Asha-Rose Migiro, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations,
Your Excellency Mr. Jorge Sampaio, High Representative for the UN Alliance of Civilizations,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning, and welcome to the General Assembly's thematic debate on fostering cross-cultural understanding for building peaceful and inclusive societies.

I am very pleased to look around and see Member States, and representatives of civil society and the academic community, joining together for this auspicious occasion.

I am particularly grateful to those who traveled long distances to share their experiences and ideas.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The United Nations was built on the premise that dialogue is the best path to peace.

That cultural diversity, freedom of thought, and knowing each other fosters respect, tolerance and mutual understanding.

How to achieve this defines our task – a vital task.

A task that can help advance our development as a people.

Historical experience has shown that diversity of cultures leads to diversity of knowledge and ideas.

Science, technology, philosophy - all benefit greatly from the sharing of ideas among people of different cultures and backgrounds.

Given the important contribution of dialogue for peace and development, we should recognize the wisdom of Member States - when realizing this need – they established the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations.

The Alliance was established at a time when grave tensions rooted in cultural differences gripped our world.

The Alliance was launched under the auspices of Spain and Turkey, and with the full support of the General Assembly.

This new institution emerged as a new hope for the international community to stem the tide of intolerance and offer public opinion a perspective of hope and fraternity.

It is encouraging that today, the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations has reached 107 Member States.

I am hopeful that, in the future, the membership of the Group will be universal.

This would be the optimum show of support for the Alliance.

I would seize the opportunity to pay homage to His Excellency Jorge Sampaio, for his active role in guiding the Alliance.

I would also like to acknowledge the strong support of United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who deserves our deepest gratitude.

Inspired by this wise, joint leadership, the Alliance of Civilizations has contributed, through its various activities, to a clear shift in the way we consider issues of “us” and “them.”

In today’s interconnected world, we cannot underestimate the power of such a shift.

The wisdom and high expertise of the members of the High-Level Group that produced the report establishing the Alliance – and I salute those of them who are present among us here today- this wisdom could not find a better moment to meet a challenge that threatened international peace and security because of cultural differences and grievances.

This is the UN at its best.

When a new need arises, the international community steps up.

The question before us is then:

How to help the Alliance to accomplish its mission in a world where cultural identities, cultural differences, need not divide us, but unite us and serve as a bridge for a more peaceful and tolerant human family.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Women,
Youth,
Media,
and immigration

These were the four practical themes that the High-Level Group’s report emphasized as particular domains which, at the moment the Alliance was established seven years ago, required more specific attention in our search for peace through dialogue and harmony.

These four themes remain as important today.

The Doha Forum last December went further, and linked the focus on the four areas to development.

Thus, the Forum recognized that without the full contribution of women, the full contribution of youth, the full contribution of the media, and the full contribution of immigrant groups, there can be no true development and therefore there can be no true peace.

But of course, peace cannot be achieved only through development.

For the worst in us, the divisions that we carry in us through feelings of superiority that lead to exclusion... Through instincts of intolerance and contempt that lead to hatred and rejection.... These sentiments can lead to mayhem and regrettably, even war.

We have seen it happen throughout history, including in modern times: in Cambodia, in Bosnia, in Rwanda, and in other instances in which intolerance prevailed and led to historic tragedy.

And so today, the work of the Alliance of Civilizations as a tool for peace is more necessary than ever.

This is what led me to organize today’s thematic debate.

We share a common responsibility that compels us to ask ourselves the following questions:

Why is today’s world again facing heightened challenges stemming from cultural diversity?

Why is culture perceived – and sometimes deeply felt – as a source of division, instead of a path to dialogue and human solidarity?

Why is the fear of the “other” an easy platform for those whose simplistic philosophy implies a world of mutually exclusive identities?

Why has multiculturalism failed and xenophobia risen in some societies?

Why are anti-immigration policies receiving, here and there, increased political support?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I could go on and on, and ask many questions that I am sure would spring to your mind whenever you reflect on issues of culture and identity.

I submit, ladies and gentlemen, that we have entered a world in which these issues will continue to unsettle us, unless we make sure that the benefits of globalization are shared in a just and harmonious way between all members of the human family.

If not – and I stress, if not - culture and identity will become the refuge of all those excluded and left behind.

And we know what happens in this case.

History tells us that exclusion leads to demonization of the other, and demonization of the other ultimately leads to conflict.

We see today instances in which groups, sometimes nations, are withdrawing from the international conversation, at a cost to their people.

Ultimately, this withdrawal represents a loss to us all, and brings the world to thresholds of patience, to the brink of war.

This need not be so, if we are wise, if we show true leadership.

This is why I decided to focus on mediation as one of the priorities of my Presidency.

At present, international momentum is building around the peaceful settlement of disputes and mediation, as stipulated by Chapter 6 of the UN Charter.

Based on my strong belief in the role of mediation as a tool for settling international disputes, on 23 May I will convene an informal high-level meeting on mediation in the General Assembly.

I invite you to share your ideas on this issue in our conversation today.

You will agree with me that whatever the financial and other costs arising from carrying out mediation, or from strengthening the tools of mediation and the role of the Alliance of Civilizations, this cost will be insignificant compared to the cost of conflict and war.

In today's world, where we see too many examples of human rights violations, mass atrocities and conflict in the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere, dialogue among civilizations offers a complimentary approach to both preventing and peacefully resolving disputes.

I firmly believe that we should strengthen the role of the Alliance of Civilizations as a mediation tool of the international community.

But to do this, the international community, the Member States, should strengthen the capacity of the Alliance through adequate resources, and give the organization the means equal to its objectives.

This is more urgent than ever.

I can see a role for the Alliance and for the Office of the High Representative in appeasing tensions, preventing misunderstandings, and mediating disputes, particularly when they arise from cultural grievances.

I appeal to Member States to strengthen this role.

This would add to our toolbox of conflict prevention and resolution, at a very little cost to the international community.

I appeal to you to recognize the importance of this civilized path for peace.

Through the Alliance of Civilizations, through the Office of the High Representative, we are given a chance to elevate our consideration of issues of peace and security to a high level of universality, and I hope, to a high level of effectiveness.

We should seize this historic opportunity.

Once again, thank you for responding to my invitation to be here today.

I wish you successful deliberations. Thank you.