

24 August 2012

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser,  
President of the 66<sup>th</sup> Session of the General Assembly,  
at the 33<sup>rd</sup> Edition of the Rimini Meetings Panel on “International  
Politics and Religious Freedom”**

Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to be here in Rimini, one of the most beautiful parts of Italy, and to attend this important event.

I wish to thank the organizers for their kind invitation to speak at this panel on “International politics and religious freedom”.

In Rimini, every year thousands of people from different parts of the world with different religions, ethnicities, cultures, backgrounds, professions come together.

Every August this city becomes a place for friendship. For 33 years, this forum has proven that diversity can create synergies and strength that we need to overcome our common challenges and to establish a harmony among us.

Religious freedom, interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding are very close to my heart.

During my tenure as Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar, I carried forth the strategic policy of my country at the UN, in Doha and elsewhere, convening many interfaith and diversity-related forums.

As the President of the General Assembly, enhancing inter-cultural dialogue is an area I am focused during my mandate. Therefore, I will tackle these issues through the UN perspective.

Excellencies,

Today, it is unfortunate that in some parts of the world we witness growing intolerance, xenophobia, and incitement to hatred.

In some societies, culture is perceived as a source of division, instead of a path to dialogue and human solidarity.

Let me give you some sad examples. Lately in some regions minorities are subject to atrocities or mass killings, because they belong to different religions. Holy books are burned, religious symbols are defamed.

This is not a society we want to live in. We should protect the diversity in our societies.

We have entered a world in which these issues will continue to unsettle us, unless we realize the benefits of diversity and share the fruits of globalization in a just and harmonious way between all members of the human family.

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 enhances respect and tolerance. Hence, the UN recognized that international community consists of different faiths and religions. The General Assembly always expressed its special concern over hatred and religious intolerance, and it took several initiatives to fight these scourges.

I invite you to take a look at the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, at the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of racial discrimination, as well at the many other relevant Human Rights covenants and instruments put in place since 1948.

The General Assembly, through its Human Rights Council, has endlessly introduced Human Rights resolutions prohibiting discrimination on grounds of religion, race, xenophobia and of related intolerance. Multi-ethnic, multi-faith, multi-lingual and multi-cultural societies are to be viewed as a source of wealth for all humanity.

Unlike last year's session of the General Assembly, where the theme of religion took a more prominent role because of the growing number of religion-focused initiatives, the surprise during this year's Third Committee session was the Human Rights representative's decision not to table the polarizing "defamation of religion" resolution.

I hope that Member States agree soon on tabling this resolution again.

Instead, as done during the March 2011 session of the Human Rights Council, the Human Rights representative introduced a resolution "Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons, based on religion or belief." This resolution was adopted with consensus and by an increased number of co-sponsors. Delegations hailed the "historic" and "landmark" consensus, as well as the positive atmosphere which prevailed during these consultations.

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

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

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

It is encouraging that today, the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations has reached more than 107 Member States, in addition to other partners.

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

The Alliance of Civilizations has contributed, through its various activities, to a clear shift in the way we look at diversity.

Following the Madrid, Istanbul and Rio Forums, the fourth forum of the Alliance was held last December in my hometown of Doha.

It focused on the interconnection between diversity and development. It is obvious that without harmony among different groups in a society, it is not possible to reach prosperity and sustainable economic development.

Now, we are looking forward to the next forum that will be hosted by Austria next year in Vienna, which I am confident that will substantially contribute to the issues we are discussing.

The Alliance has a role in a world, where different religions need not divide us, but unite us and serve as a bridge for a more peaceful and tolerant human family.

Excellencies,

As part of my support and commitment to these issues, I have organized, since September 2011, meetings and other activities to set the stage at the UN for in-depth discussions.

My office worked in close partnership with representatives of civil society organizations, including the Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN, to organize a ground-breaking event in honour of World Interfaith Harmony Week on February 7th.

Speakers from a wide range of nationalities and religious traditions –side by side with United Nations Officials, Missions, Agencies, and NGOs– demonstrated our shared commitment to finding “Common Ground for the Common Good”.

They highlighted inspiring efforts among people of different faiths in the areas of the Mediation of Conflict, Disaster Prevention and Response, Sustainable Development, and Revitalization of the United Nations.

In addition, the spirit of this special event was enhanced by uplifting music, the voices of children, and a beautiful ceremony with people of different faiths watering a single tree representing our common ground.

On 22 March, I convened a one-day thematic debate at the General Assembly, in partnership with the Alliance of Civilizations.

There was a general understanding among the participants that politicians, academia and media have a key role to play in every society. Participants appreciated the invaluable contributions of the Alliance of Civilizations.

The debate laid particular emphasis on the contribution of the youth. Young leaders, attending from different parts of the world, expressed the challenges they are facing in their own societies on freedom of religion and tolerance, and came up with useful suggestions, based on their experiences.

It was noted at the meeting that there is still a long way for most of us to recognize the reality of different cultural, religious and political identities and not to allow them to be an obstacle to reaching out to one another.

Humankind must build bridges that are strong enough to carry the weight of our differences. That process requires a sense of common history and perspective. Everyone must accept that others have a story to tell and everyone should make the effort to listen to that story as part of the general narrative.

Here I recall what Kant the philosopher said in the past “live and let live”.

At the meeting, we also considered the impact of new Information and Communication Technologies on our societies. I do not need to remind you. You all know how today social media are certainly playing a positive role in bringing us together. However, they also serve as a tool dividing us through spreading hatred.

At the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on mediation, organized on 23 May, also at my initiative, we considered the role of the Alliance as a complementary tool for mediating disputes arising particularly from religious and cultural differences.

During my tenure, I wanted to set an example for the vision I believe in. Therefore, I attended several events related to interfaith where we discussed cross cultural dialogues as crucial components for building peace, tolerance, harmony and mutual understanding around the world.

I attended the Holocaust remembrance service at the New York Synagogue on 21 st January 2012. I gave a lecture at the “Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies” on 1 March 2012. I had an audience with his Holiness Pope Benedict XVII at the Vatican, on 15 June 2012.

Before my term ends in mid next month, I plan to organize some other events to further promote these issues.

First, before the adoption of the General Assembly resolution on mediation on 13 September, I will be screening highlights of a documentary entitled “Beyond Right and Wrong”. The theme of this film is forgiveness.

The documentary presents three conflicts from three separate regions of the globe: the 1984 Brighton Hotel Bombing in Northern Ireland, the conflict between Palestine and Israel, and Rwandan Genocide. Forgiveness makes mediation possible and without mediation, there is no progress.

Then, on 14 September, a special forum will be convened at the General Assembly on culture of peace. We will build on the annual General Assembly resolutions on this matter and discuss thoroughly with key speakers how to establish a genuine culture of peace.

Excellencies,

Before concluding, let me sincerely thank once again the organizers for giving me this unique opportunity to be with the distinguished politicians, intellectuals, religious leaders, and civil society representatives, and to join this panel discussion.

In Rimini, my commitment to the notions of living together side by side, accepting and respecting others as they are, and focusing more on the common values rather than differences has strengthened, after listening to other participants.

Although my term as the President of the United Nations General Assembly will come to an end next month, I will continue to work to foster interfaith dialogue, mutual understanding and religious freedom with the same spirit and determination.

I remind myself and remind you all that our different religions can be invested to enhance our peace and security in our one and common world.

Thank you.