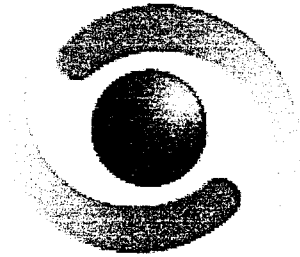


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ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

UN HIGH REPRESENTATIVE

Jorge Sampaio

**Address to the UN Human Rights Council
High Level Segment**

Geneva,

March, 3, 2008

Mr. President and members of the Bureau

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

- First of all, let me extend, Mr President, my warmest thanks for inviting me to address this distinguished audience;
- I was very much looking forward to seizing this unprecedented opportunity to raise a number of topical issues on the Alliance of Civilizations' initiative that I have the privilege to head since May last year;
- As you may know, the Alliance was launched by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in 2005 under the co-sponsorship of the Heads of Government of Spain and Turkey.
- It is aimed at addressing widening rifts within and among societies by reaffirming a paradigm of mutual respect among peoples of different cultural and religious traditions and by helping to mobilize concerted action toward this end.
- This effort reflects the will of the vast majority of peoples to reject extremism in any society and to support overwhelmingly their aspiration to live in peace, based on respect for equal human dignity.

- What does respect for equal human dignity mean? It is all about human rights, which lie at the centre of your leadership role.
- And since the goals of the Alliance are intrinsically linked with the mandate of the Council, your and our action is quite complementary.

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- In taking the floor, my aim is threefold:
 - To convince those representatives, here today, of countries that are not yet on board that becoming a part of the Alliance of Civilizations' initiative is well worthwhile.
 - To insist with those representatives, here today, of countries that are already members of the Group of Friends that it is urgent to turn political commitments into deliverables and to help move the Alliance forward.
 - To appeal to both to combine their efforts in order to achieve our common goals.

1. First point – good reasons to become part of the Alliance

- We all know that our world is alarmingly out of balance, marked by great inequalities and paradoxes. In our globalizing times, it is not just the planet that is showing degradation, but also human atmosphere.

- The current international difficulties and the increasing anxiety we all feel in living together in mutual respect have encouraged the misguided view that cultures are set on an unavoidable collision course and have helped turn negotiable disputes into seemingly intractable identity-based conflicts.

- Therefore, it is essential to counter stereotypes and misconceptions that deepen patterns of hostility and mistrust within and among societies. This urgent task constitutes to be the *raison d'être* of the Alliance.

- As conflicts everywhere are conflicts anywhere, it is against this background of urgency that the Alliance of Civilizations has a role to play in helping to build bridges between societies, promoting dialogue and understanding and forging the collective will to address the world's imbalances.

- As a political initiative under the auspices of the UN Secretary, the Alliance is a renewed commitment to the UN values – in particular to the promotion of human rights. It has a global scope, offers an innovative framework for action and looks forward to becoming a helpful tool in reducing cultural and religious tensions and hostility within and among societies.
- As UN members, States have an important and unique role to play within the Alliance of Civilizations.
- To be part of the Alliance is a win-win situation. It both strengthens the Alliance as a whole and empowers each State to find the appropriate answers to these common challenges and threats to human security.
- The Alliance of Civilizations is the right initiative, at the right time. Together, we can ensure that it will also bring about the right results as the Alliance is mainly an action -oriented initiative.

2. Second Point: Membership of the Alliance means turning political commitments into deliverables

- When I took office, nine months ago, my motto was caution, though confidence was my battle cry and my epigraph, in the certainty that the Alliance is the right answer in filling a huge political void.

- Now the grounds for my convictions are considerably more solid, and the reasons for my optimism as to the future of the Alliance have been cemented to a greater extent.
- Basically, the Alliance has started to deliver – part of our Implementation Plan has already been implemented, the main priority projects have been launched and the first annual Forum of the Alliance, held last month, was a success and generated a number of significant outcomes.

Dear members of the Alliance

- As you know, I am very attached to the results-oriented approach underpinning the Alliance initiative. But to become a sustainable initiative, the Alliance counts on your active support and contribution as you are its main partners. Furthermore, it must be multi-tasking and built on multi-stakeholders partnerships. We can miss no opportunity whatsoever to bring about results.
- This is why I have been insisting on the importance of the National Strategies for cross-cultural dialogue at State level; of the Partnership agreements with international organizations and bodies; of the network to be built to bring on board civil society's input and contribution.
- A great deal of the Alliance's future is being played this year.

- Either we shall be able to divulge the Alliance and anchor it on the regional processes under way, integrating it into the respective agendas, or we shall find it hard to double the cape of good intentions.
- Either we shall be able to include it in the states' internal agendas, or we shall be left standing in the field of debate and rhetoric.
- Either we shall succeed in mobilising civil society or we shall compromise our ultimate goal, which is to aim for small improvements in the field that will bring fresh hope to the peoples.
- Of course, I am well aware, too, that everyone may be tempted to make of the Alliance an instrument in the service of their own interests. But the main thing, besides the multiplicity of uses to which it can be put, is to preserve the unity of intentions and of action.
- This is why committed and active membership is critical to advancing the goals of the Alliance and to making it a powerful catalyst of change on the ground.

3. Why we should work together?

- Let me put it bluntly: as a UN initiative the Alliance can only be developed in close coordination with all its partners, both within and outside the UN system.

- The Alliance builds upon and is not designated to replace ongoing initiatives and programs related to its goals. And it would be wrong to aim at acting on an isolated, competitive or unilateral basis.

- Mainstreaming the agenda of the Alliance within the UN wide action, regional processes under way, and also within national policies and local initiatives, is therefore a major concern for me. This is the first point I want to make.

- In order to achieve this goal, it is crystal clear that the Alliance has to evolve as much as possible as a transversal and cross cutting agenda to strengthen preventive diplomacy and peace building, while enhancing the safeguard of human rights of all members of the human family.

- Second point: how can the Alliance interact with the Council of Human Rights? Why, after all, is this interaction essential for both in my humble view?

- In my view, our complementary role is also crystal clear. On the one hand, the Council has the expertise, the know-how and the most relevant experience in human rights as it plays a leadership role in this field. On the other hand, to establish genuine dialogue among peoples and nations, which the Alliance aims to do, a common understanding of international human rights principles and a universal commitment to their full and consistent application are required.

- Therefore, respect for human rights, as recognized by the Universal Declaration and the wide range of international human rights instruments it has given birth to, and international humanitarian law, is both the pre-condition and the framework of the Alliance, and its ultimate goal. Many of the difficulties the Alliance is faced with stem from this paradoxical, in-between situation.

- Actually, the Alliance aims at bridging this gap. Its major challenge is to take appropriate action – mainly in the areas of education, youth, media and migrations - that combines diversity of cultures, religions and civilizations with the fact that we all share the most basic attributes, recognized, by the way, by all the great religious traditions.
- To prevent polarization, confrontation, conflict and intolerance and to develop a culture of peace, understanding, tolerance and respect, we need universalist values grounded on the common humanity shared by every man, woman and child on earth, regardless of linguistic, racial, religious and other differences.
- The point is that nowadays more than ever – particularly because of the international situation created in the wake of September 11 -, the universality of Human Rights is under siege.

- But, in my view, this controversy rests on a number of misunderstandings. The Declaration does not mean, in the slightest, the application of the rights enshrined therein obeys a single, rigid and immutable form or pattern that rides roughshod over each and every local singularity, tradition and experience. Secondly, accusations of cultural imperialism and cultural relativism against the Declaration of 1948 are frequently unfounded, not only because various players from very different backgrounds were involved in drawing up their wording and very extensive consultations were made, but also their more direct authors – and I would recall, by way of example, Cassin, Chang, Malik e Eleanor Roosevelt – were fully aware of the complexity and bounds of the task with which they were entrusted.

- It must be made clear that with the Declaration, despite its imperfections, we ensure more rights for everyone than before; that with it, the preservation of diversity and the right of difference are better assumed and, in this way too, the safeguard of what unites us and is common to us is further strengthened.

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- In conclusion, let me stress that the Alliance is looking forward to working with you.

- I am strongly convinced that the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is clearly based on recognition of a common humanity and provides a minimum solution to deal with its miseries.

- This is why I do believe that we can benefit from your experience, findings and leverage; and that, in turn, we can offer to you a framework which will help in implementing rights in a variety of ways, so that, at the end of the day, we can combine universality of human rights with a stronger protection of various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds.

- In this regard, I do believe that the Alliance and the Council should consult each other at both political and secretariat level; moreover ad hoc consultations at a senior political level should also be organised on topical issues of joint interest. "Focal points" within our secretariats should be responsible for ensuring permanent contacts between both organizations.

- Summing up, as someone has put it, we can help each other in achieving our shared goal - that “many different kinds of music can be played on the Declaration’s thirty strings”.

Thank you