



H.E. Mr. Jorge Sampaio, former President of Portugal,
UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations

High-Level Political Dialogue

Since its establishment in 2005, the Alliance of Civilizations has been supported in its role within the United Nations system and beyond by the Group of Friends (GoF), a community of UN member countries, UN agencies and other international organizations that have demonstrated an active interest in furthering the goals of the Alliance. Having more than doubled in size to over eighty members since the High Representative was appointed by the UN Secretary General in April 2007, the Group of Friends represents the primary mechanism for concerted political action and mobilization toward the objectives of the Alliance. During the First Alliance Forum, a High-Level Political Dialogue bringing together the Group of Friends community was convened. Over forty ministers, (including 22 foreign ministers), secretaries-general, and directors-general of Group of Friends and observer countries participated in the session with the remainder of GoF members represented by parliamentarians, ambassadors, senior policy-makers and advisors to heads of state.

President Sampaio opened the session with a brief update on progress achieved since the Implementation Plan of the Alliance was launched in June 2007. He emphasized the results-based approach of the Alliance and the need for this focus to be reflected through practical action at national and local levels. In order to assure the long-term coherence and sustainability of the Alliance, President Sampaio stressed that the Alliance should develop strong international partnerships and strive to achieve progress in those areas where unity of purpose and unity of action can be achieved across diverse actors and stakeholders. He also stated that the work and activities of the Alliance should be further integrated into the UN system. Moreover, the Alliance's work would also be strengthened through the development of national and regional policies and initiatives. Regarding organizational matters, President Sampaio underlined the need for the Alliance to remain a light and effective structure. He added that contributions to the Voluntary Trust Fund for the Alliance are essential to its continued functioning and long-term viability.

Over the course of the High-Level Dialogue, strong support was expressed for the Alliance and its goals. The timeliness of the initiative was highlighted, given the increasing urgency of improving cross-cultural and inter-religious understanding in order to enhance international stability and expand human security and peace. Referring to the global context, participants pointed out that both political and economic factors were central to countering extremism and the polarization of cross-cultural relations. Several noted that without progress on specific conflicts—notably in the Middle East and most prominently in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—the impact of the Alliance would be limited while others emphasized the importance of addressing poverty and economic inequities.

H.E. PRESIDENT JORGE SAMPAIO
High Representative for the AoC

GROUP OF FRIENDS

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Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Spain

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Minister of Foreign Affairs, Turkey

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Minister of Foreign Affairs, Afghanistan

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Ambassador of Czech Republic to Spain

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Minister of Foreign Affairs, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

MR. RENAUD DONNEDIEU DE VABRES
Ambassador responsible for the Cultural Dimension of the French EU Presidency, France

MR. PAUL JEAN-ORTIZ
Minister Counsellor of the Embassy of France in Spain

MRS. HEIDRUN TEMPEL
Special Representative for Dialogue among Civilizations, Germany

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MR. YANNIS VALINAKIS
Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Greece

H.E. KINGA GÖNCZ
Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hungary

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Ambassador of India to Spain

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Ambassador of Indonesia to Spain

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Director of External Relations, IOM

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Deputy Foreign Minister for Europe, Iran

DR. ABDULAZIZ OTHMAN ALTWAIJRI
Director General, ISESCO

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Minister for Youth, Politics and Sports, Italy

MR. MOTOHIDE YOSHIKAWA
Ambassador of Japan to Spain

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Minister of Culture, Jordan

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Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kazakhstan

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Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs,
League of Arab States

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Secretary-General, OIC

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Director-General, Cultural and Social Affairs, OIC

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Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lithuania

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Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign
Affairs and Immigration, Luxembourg

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Minister of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia

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President of the National Council for Culture and
Arts, Mexico

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Minister of Habous and Islamic Affairs, Morocco

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Minister of Education and Culture, Mozambique

H.E. MAXIME VERHAGEN
Minister of Foreign Affairs, The Netherlands

H.E. CHRIS CARTER
Minister of Education and Ethnic Affairs, New Zealand

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Representatives of diverse states shared the steps that their governments were taking to foster tolerance and mutual respect between communities while countering the influence of extremists who exploit social, cultural and economic insecurities to advance exclusivist brands of identity politics. In this regard, some GoF members noted the challenge they face in striking a proper balance between “soft approaches” (education, exchanges, youth mobilization, etc.) that support increased cross-cultural understanding on the one hand, and “hard approaches” required to police and combat violent extremism, including countering the influence of external support for extremist ideologies and groups on the other.

Because the Alliance is primarily concerned with “soft approaches”, participants focused on these, with several issues emerging over the course of the discussion as common areas of priority for diverse Group of Friends members. These included:

- celebrating diversity as a source of local, national and regional strength and vibrancy;
- focusing on “shared regional interests” through on-going regional dialogue and cooperation processes;
- expanding understanding and respect for diverse communities and cultures through education, exchanges, youth mobilization, and media; and
- seeking to establish a common framework for dialogue and cooperation by stressing the common principles of respect for human dignity and the values common to all as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

One of the themes that received greatest attention throughout the high-level dialogue was the place of religion and the role of religious leaders and communities in efforts to cultivate social cohesion within and across national boundaries. Three primary areas of focus emerged from the discussion of this theme reflecting action that some Group of Friends members are taking or encouraging others to take:

- fostering greater understanding and respect between religious communities by, for example, recognizing the value of—and in some cases facilitating the formation of—inter-religious councils as platforms for inter-religious dialogue, cooperative action, and peace-building among communities at both national and regional levels;
- expanding education to ensure a basic understanding of diverse religions and belief systems among general populations; and

- coming to terms with diverse perspectives on the relationship between religion and politics.

The discussion also focused on freedom of expression and the need to respect religious beliefs. The point was made several times that freedom of expression was a universal right which was to be promoted and protected, but that it needed to be exercised responsibly.

The practical initiatives launched during the Forum and mentioned by the High Representative in his opening remarks were all referenced during the high-level dialogue as welcome examples of dialogue leading to action. Multiple Group of Friends members urged the Alliance to maintain its demonstrated commitment to pragmatic approaches aimed at touching people's lives in practical terms. To this end, a number of commitments as well as recommendations by Group of Friends members were put forward during the high-level dialogue. In particular, Bulgaria, New Zealand, Spain, and Turkey presented national strategies developed to advance the objectives of the Alliance and foster greater cross-cultural understanding, in line with the recommendations contained in the AoC's High-level Group Report.

The High-Level Political Dialogue session concluded with a commitment that the Alliance would seek to support Group of Friends members in their efforts to foster cross-cultural understanding within their own borders and regions; to facilitate information exchange and dissemination among them so that their efforts can increasingly benefit from being part of a collective response to the challenges of cross-cultural polarization that confront every region; and to further develop its own capacity as a facilitator and catalyst for pragmatic action toward these ends.

Finally, Turkey confirmed its intention to host the second Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations in 2009.

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H.E. HAKON GULBRANDSEN
State Secretary for International Development,
Norway

MR. HILAL B. MARHOON SALIM ALMAMARY
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Russian Federation

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Secretary-General, SEGIB

MR. ABAS NDIOUR
Ambassador of Senegal to Spain

H.E. VUC JERICIC
Minister of Foreign Affairs, Serbia

MR. FEODOR STARCEVIC
Assistant Minister for Multilateral Affairs, Serbia

MRS. ANITA PITAN
Director-General, Policy for Planning and
Multilateral Relations, Slovenia

MR. SIPHO GEORGE NENE
Deputy Director for Multilateral Issues,
Department of Foreign Affairs, South Africa

H.E. CECILIA MALMSTRÖM
Minister for EU Affairs, Sweden

H.E. MICHELINE CALMY-REY
Minister of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland

MR. SALAHEDDIN MAHAMID
Tourism Attaché, Embassy of Syria in Spain

MR. MANASPAS XUTO
Special Envoy of the Prime Minister, Thailand

MR. MOHAMED HASSINE FANTAR
Special Advisor to the President of Tunisia

MRS. ELIZABETH GATEAU
Secretary-General, UCLG

MR. ANDRIY VESELOVSKIY
Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ukraine

MR. KOCHIRO MATSUURA
Director-General, UNESCO

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Minister of Culture, Youth and Community
Development, United Arab Emirates

H.E. SHAHID MALIK
Minister for International Development, United
Kingdom

H.E. ABUBAKER AL-QIRBI
Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yemen

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Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs,
Canada

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Special Adviser to the Prime Minister, Ethiopia

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Ambassador of Israel to Spain

H.E. TAREK MITRI
Minister of Culture, Lebanon

H.E. MOHAMED SALEK OULD MOHAMED LEMINE
Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mauritania

MR. HARUNA GINSAU
Chargé d'Affaires, Embassy of Nigeria in Spain

MR. MUSA AMER ODEH
General Delegate of the Palestinian Authority
in Spain

MR. SAUD BIN NAIF BIN ABDULAZIZ AL SAUD
Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to Spain

MR. EDUARDO AGUIRRE
Ambassador of the USA to Spain

H.E. Mr. Terry Davis
Secretary-General of the Council of Europe

