



ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

U.N. HIGH REPRESENTATIVE FOR
THE ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

Address to the Spanish Ambassadors' Conference

*Madrid, Santa Cruz,
September 11, 2008*

Your Excellencies

- I know that time is short and that your packed agenda requires brief interventions aimed at what is essential.

- Therefore I shall not dwell on preliminary considerations, even though I cannot refrain from publicly thanking the Spanish authorities for offering me the unique opportunity to participate in this meeting. Also allow me to warmly greet all those present in a gesture of personal tribute to the prestigious Spanish diplomacy, of which I am a great admirer! Lastly, I want to thank, in particular, all those who, since I was appointed High Representative of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, have supported and assisted me directly with their experience, contacts and friendship, in carrying out these functions.

Your Excellencies,

And, if I may, dear friends.

- The unique role of Spain in the launch of the Alliance of Civilizations makes it unnecessary to give an extensive presentation on the factual content of this initiative, which was developed under the United Nations umbrella.

- Consequently, my approach will be focused on the challenges and difficulties faced by the Alliance. I'll begin with three short notes to describe them, then I will make two comments and, finally, I will end with some suggestions that are ultimately challenges that I take the liberty of giving you, in the name of friendship.

Three notes on the situation

- These three notes revolve around the “3 A’s of the Alliance” *Aims, Agenda, Approach*

First note - the aims of the Alliance.

- As you know, not everybody approves of the name of this initiative with the same conviction. A few are unhappy that there is talk of alliances, either due to its military connotation or due to its biblical sense. Others would have preferred Alliance of Cultures; and there are others, such as the writer Juan Goytisolo, who propose “Alliance of Values” as an alternative.
- When someone proposes such arguments my answer is always the same: we cannot be held hostage to quarrels on words because, beyond them, there is still a problem whose existence, in the end, few would deny: the increasing difficulties of governance that the extreme cultural diversity of our societies impose on us, the countless conflicts and tensions that this has caused and its relationship with an increase in violence, extremism and war.

- Therefore, the purpose of the Alliance or the objectives to be achieved are twofold: first, to contribute to improving relations between diverse cultural and religious societies and communities; the second, to establish a framework for the fight against extremism (and therefore also against terrorism) with a view to prevention, acting at the level of education, youth, media and migration, which are, as you know, the four areas of intervention of the Alliance.

Second Note - the Agenda of the Alliance

- In proposing to intervene in these four domains, which even recently were mostly referred to as national policies, the Alliance innovates because it clearly brings them to the International Agenda and places them under a prism of good governance of cultural diversity.
- On the other hand, for the Alliance, education, as well as the media, youth and migration, are subjects that must be “cross referenced” through a prism of common approach, either domestically by the States, or at the international level. This is an equally new perspective which must be given a systematic, consistent and sustainable character.

- Therefore, I suggested three challenges to the Group of Friends of the Alliance - a community that already has ninety members. I urged member countries to develop National Strategies for intercultural dialogue, I invited the international organizations to work in partnership with the Alliance so as to enhance the extraordinary wealth they have available and give it growing visibility and enhanced political unity of purpose. I asked both of them to appoint national coordinators who would work at the same time as contacts and national coordinators of the Alliance.

- In my view, fulfilling these conditions is essential to the transformation of the Alliance into an initiative sustainable over time.

- To achieve this, it is still essential to ensure a fourth condition: that of the close partnership of civil society with the Alliance. This is a pillar - in my view - still in its infancy, but at this time it is my intention to give priority to strengthening it.

Third Note – the Approach to the Alliance

- Given the goals pursued and its agenda, the Alliance is a practical initiative, bound by the obligation to provide results.

- The symposia, debates and lectures - with more or less academic and more or less reserved profiles - are certainly interesting and useful because, in matters of concern to the Alliance, it is important to combat stereotypes, prejudices and simplistic and limiting analysis, all of which are the result of ignorance.
- However, it will also be important to avoid the pitfall of the “lay theology of dialogue,” to use the expression written by Régis Debray in a small booklet entitled “Dialogue of Civilizations, a contemporary myth,” which outlines a set of criticisms, which in fact are all relevant to initiatives like the Alliance...

Two Thoughts

- I would now like to share with you two thoughts on the Alliance that ultimately result from my many contacts.
- First, the high expectations that the Alliance, as an initiative of the United Nations, raises just about everywhere. It is indeed surprising because such expectations are actually inversely proportional to the means available...

- This “finding” naturally generates mixed feelings because, on the one hand, it means that the Alliance comes to fill a thematic and political vacuum - and to this extent it is very exciting because there is room for intervention, compatible with innovative solutions - ; but, on the other hand, the likelihood of failure - that is, of irrelevance - is also directly proportional to, let’s say, the “honeymoon” period the Alliance is currently going through ...

- The second point concerns the role of the Alliance in the United Nations system and within the international community, which is far from being defined or even generally admitted.

- This point is important. On the one hand, viewed in the United Nations system, the Alliance faces a challenge because it appears, in some ways, as a foreign body or “an object not clearly identified.” Due to its subjects of concern, it has overlapping areas with other UN bodies - and primarily with UNESCO ; through its approach and purposes, it appears as an instrument of preventive diplomacy, to be used as a way of preventing conflictual situations, but also for the peace consolidation situations.

- It is clear that none of this means that the Alliance is designed to interfere in the political process of peace negotiation, let alone intervene in situations of armed conflict.

- But, in return, it can - and should – develop as an instrument of conflict prevention and in post-conflict situations as an instrument of peace consolidation.
- Certainly, in accordance with the terms of the mandate given to the High Representative, he can be explicitly called by the Secretary-General to intervene in crisis situations and help reduce tensions of a cultural or religious nature.
- On the other hand, in the galaxy of the so-called “International Community,” which also includes the extensive network of civil society organizations, the Alliance is certainly another initiative that adds to the growing number of others. The difference, though, namely lies in that the Alliance is an initiative with the UN mark, which gives it an enhanced capability of unparalleled assertion, dynamism and credibility.
- From this set of elements, it becomes clear that the Alliance should not and could not replace other initiatives/bodies or organizations, nor compete with them. But it also cannot get lost in the thicket of initiatives that proliferate, somewhat haphazardly, everywhere.
- It seems to me that the strength of the Alliance will have to result from the ability to demonstrate that it can act both as a bridge for joint efforts and as a catalyst for “*multi-stakeholders*” initiatives.

- With these two points, I summarize some of the most interesting aspects of the Alliance because I think they are likely to cause some reflection. Let me stress that any contribution from you to feed the debate and find solutions to these problems will, of course, be desirable and especially desired!

A challenge

Your Excellencies:

- These are crucial times for the consolidation of the Alliance.
- We either succeed in expanding it and making it part of the regional processes underway, integrating it into their respective agendas (I am thinking, for example, in the European Union, in the South-East European Cooperation Process, the Union for the Mediterranean, in the cooperation of the Black Sea States, in the Arab League, in the Organization of the Islamic Conference, in APEC and ASEAN, in the Gulf Cooperation Council, in Ibero-America, in the African Union, in OSCE, in the Council of Europe, for example) or, as I said, we will hardly pass the cape of good intentions.
- We either succeed in integrating the Alliance objectives in the internal agenda of the States, or we will hardly get beyond the level of mere rhetoric.

- We either succeed in mobilizing civil society, or we will hardly reach our ultimate goal which is to achieve improvements that are small on the ground, but are symbols of new hope.
- To achieve these goals your cooperation is indispensable.
- Therefore, I leave you with a couple of suggestions that are also a challenge that I give you for the consolidation of the Alliance.
- First, do not hesitate to contact me if you have any suggestions to make regarding initiatives that the Alliance might propose.
- Secondly, I ask you to use your influence, in the extensive network of contacts throughout the world, to provide projection and visibility to the Alliance.
- Thirdly, you could try to foster, in the countries where you are accredited, together with your “like-minded” colleagues and local figures in civil society, informal circles of friends of the Alliance that, two or three times a year, would meet and discuss topics of the Alliance, or even promote the organization of a joint event. That would be a valuable contribution to deglobalize the Alliance and give it local roots.

Thank you all.