

*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*



ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- First of all, let me express my deep appreciation to the Gulbenkian Foundation for hosting this timely Forum on the topic of human rights in view of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- Secondly, I want to extend my warm thanks to the North-South Center of the Council of Europe for having involved the Alliance of Civilizations in the preparation of this initiative.
- Barely one month ago, the Alliance of Civilizations and the Council of Europe signed a Memorandum of Understanding to shape the lines of our future collaboration.
- It is very stimulating to see how we have managed to turn future into present in such a successful way! This Conference is a good example of the kind of constructive multi-stakeholder partnership and cooperation that the Alliance is seeking to promote and facilitate. Thanks for showing the way forward!

## Ladies and Gentlemen

- The subject that brings us together is one that I hold dear: Human Rights. Human rights, peace and democracy are values to which I have dedicated my entire life, that grip me and are at the center of the Alliance of Civilizations, a new United Nations political initiative.
- You may remember that the Alliance of Civilizations, launched by Spain and Turkey in 2005, but that now numbers more than ninety members, aims basically to counter the idea that civilizations are set on an unavoidable collision course and that world peace and stability are threatened by intractable identity-based conflicts.
- In positive terms, the Alliance seeks to address widening rifts between societies by reaffirming a paradigm of mutual respect among peoples and communities of different cultural and religious traditions, whilst working to promote good governance of cultural diversity.
- “How to live together whilst respecting others in their difference?” “Can we, being both equal and different, live together?» - these are the questions the Alliance strives to answer by promoting concrete projects in the areas of youth, education, the media and migrations.

- The Alliance carries out its actions by creating partnerships with governments but also with the private sector, the media, civil society and intergovernmental organizations, in which the Council of Europe has a decisive role to play.

## Ladies and Gentlemen

- We are celebrating this year the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- But, let's face it: this is a rather gloomy anniversary because after all our bill of rights is under pressure.
- Firstly, universality of human rights is at the core of all disputes, contested by proponents of cultural relativism who are suspicious about the idea that human rights are indeed for everybody.
- Secondly, existing rights are challenged by advances of technology and science, as well as by our changing living conditions. Similarly, recognition of potentially new rights seems necessary.

- Thirdly, protection of civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights raises the problem not only of categorization and prioritization of human rights, but also of both their legal and political recognition.
- Fourth, there is the hot topic of human rights violations and derogations for the sake of national security and because of the war on terror. But I also include here the wars of aggression, war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity, as well as all the problems of human rights abuses.

#### Ladies and Gentlemen

- I am sure that each of you is able to mention spontaneously - at least one example - of how human rights are at the center of our everyday lives.
- Just think of the use of headscarves or jibab in some European countries. Think of birth control and of reproductive health. Think of genital mutilation. Think of abortion and euthanasia disputes. Think of the “Danish cartoons”, of film Fitna of Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Versets. Think of Guantanamo. Think of Darfur. Think of access to water, of climate change, think of the new problems of sharing and protecting information raised by our information society.
- This is all about human rights and human rights law.

- This is all about our current difficulties to cope with universality of human rights.
  
- Indeed you may ask, what make us so sure that universalism is right? And how can we turn it into practice even if we embrace universal human rights in theory?
  
- Nevertheless, I personally think that human rights provide us with a new language than can speak to all peoples on earth irrespective of religious belief, cultural traditions or ideological convictions.
  
- Human rights are, in a sense, a codification of what we feel that each person has a right to in life. They place dignity, justice, tolerance and mutual respect at the heart of all our activity.
  
- In my view, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is clearly based on the recognition of a common humanity and provides a minimum solution to deal with its miseries.

- This is why human rights are easy to be explained in negative terms. I mean: we can disagree on what is good, but we almost agree about what is wrong. For instance, we all know that none of us want to be tortured or imprisoned indefinitely without trial. We all know that none of us want to die of hunger or of diseases.
  
- But can we go further ?
  
- Can we state that is common humanity that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights seeks to protect?
  
- I think so! We can make a strong case of it without embarking on theoretical approaches or endless philosophical arguments about natural law, social behavior and social contract.

- Let's only think of what it means to be human, and - for example - oppose individuals, human beings, to the animal world.
  
- Let's us think of what is called the Golden Rule, or the ethic of reciprocity which states that one must do unto others as one would be treated themselves. The principle being that reciprocal recognition and respect of rights ensures that one's rights will be protected.
  
- By the way, what I am speaking about is exactly what Karen Armstrong pointed out in this room some days ago when she evoked "the feeling of compassion".
  
- This gives a sound ground to universality. But indeed universality of human rights does not mean that they are absolute. I am not suggesting that human rights are independent of cultural contexts.
  
- Anyway tomorrow I will elaborate more on this point.



- Now I just want to stress that what we see in most criticism of universalism is not so much a challenge to the universality of human rights but an impassioned debate about what those rights mean in practice.
  
- Therefore, instead of talking about the theory, we should rather engage in the practice, in cross-cultural dialogue and discussion as well as in collaborative actions on substantive issues. This is at least the approach that the Alliance of Civilizations aims at contributing to promote.
  
- Because, after all, to prevent polarization, confrontation, conflict and intolerance and to develop a culture of peace, understanding, tolerance and respect, we need to build bridges between peoples to make them feel that there is a common humanity shared by every man, woman and child on earth, regardless of linguistic, racial, religious and other differences.

Many thanks

Good work