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STATEMENT BY THE HIGH REPRESENTATIVE ON THE VIOLENCE IN GAZA

30 December 2008

As the United Nations' High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, I visited Israel and the occupied territories of Palestine, including Gaza, in May 2008.

My message was clear and quite unambiguous for both sides: the Alliance of Civilizations is not about solving protracted conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, but, on the contrary, it is about creating a wide platform of global dimensions for developing inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue that can help assuage, if not resolve, conflicts.

At that time, I mean just six months ago, it was still possible to think that the beginnings of a peace agreement were not totally unlikely by the end of the year. We have now got to the last days of 2008. But unfortunately we have also reached a kind of bottom line that has blasted away any peace agreement into a remote future.

Looking at the current escalation of violence, the continued rocket strikes targeting Israeli territory from Gaza and the disproportionate use of force by the Israeli armed forces inflicting an unacceptable death toll on the Palestinians, I could not but express my grave concern and add my voice to all those who have already called for an immediate halt to all forms of violence. I could not but support an urgent ceasefire. I could not but urge both sides to restore a lasting truce. I could not but call for the lifting of the Israeli siege on Gaza. But I would also like vehemently to ask the international community not to remain indifferent to this tragedy.

The last days' unacceptable number of civilian casualties and the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza as well as the right to protect Israeli citizens make this a dangerous moment which should be of concern to the whole of the region and beyond.

Religious leaders on both sides should use their clout to call their constituencies for exercise maximum restraint. Neither military strikes nor rockets attacks will bring security and calm to the region and to its afflicted population.

All political leaders committed to peaceful negotiations should call for a renewal of the

truce in the Gaza strip. The interest of the Palestinian people can only be secured through a viable Palestinian state existing alongside a secure Israel.

Everybody, every man, every woman, even every child around the world should extend a helping hand to their fellows affected by this conflict. We must express our solidarity and strong collective will to avoid a major humanitarian catastrophe.

War has no future to offer to anyone. To break the unbearable circle of intolerance, polarization, confrontation and conflict, we need to stop the persistent attempt to turn back the clock of history or, worse, to remain hostages to the hurdles of the past.

There are no wars of salvation nor decent survival without a prospect of peace looming large. Israel cannot make peace with the Palestinians without taking into consideration the post 1967 territorial situation. Likewise, Palestinians cannot make peace with the Israelis without moving to an orderly, inclusive and democratic statehood assuring the security of Israel and all its neighbors.

This conflict has lasted for too many years burning the lives and hopes of at least two generations of men, women and children; fuelling mistrust, resentments, confrontation and blind violence; emptying the grounds of a common human dignity shared by all individuals and peoples.

The Middle East is littered with the rubble of missed opportunities. The tide of exasperation and exhaustion is at its highest. Therefore, like navigators do, it is time to sail against the tide and turn this endless and unacceptable intractable conflict into a politically negotiable dispute. We need a global humanitarian burst, we need courage and a bold vision of the future on the part of Israelis and Palestinians but also of all peoples capable of influencing the situation to achieve a just and sustainable solution to the conflict. Let's give peace an opportunity and renew our collective effort to achieve this goal in 2009. The Alliance of Civilizations is ready to give its contribution.