



# General Assembly

Sixty-third session

**47<sup>th</sup>** plenary meeting

Wednesday, 12 November 2008, 3 p.m.  
New York

Official Records

*President:* Mr. D'Escoto Brockmann. . . . . (Nicaragua)

*The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.*

## Agenda item 45 (continued)

### Culture of peace

#### Report of the Secretary-General (A/63/262)

#### Note by the Secretary-General (A/63/127)

#### Draft resolutions (A/63/L.23 and A/63/L.24/Rev.1)

### Address by His Eminence Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar of the Arab Republic of Egypt

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): The Assembly will hear a statement by His Eminence Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar of the Arab Republic of Egypt.

*Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar of the Arab Republic of Egypt, was escorted into the General Assembly Hall.*

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): On behalf of the General Assembly, I have the honour to welcome to the United Nations the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, His Eminence Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, and to invite him to address the Assembly.

**Grand Imam Tantawi** (*spoke in Arabic*): When we talk about the culture of peace in Islam, we talk about positive dialogue among civilizations, religions and cultures, and about realities about which the wise of all times and places concur.

The first reality is that all peoples are created by God, the Most Exalted, out of one substance, for the purposes of devoutly worshipping their Creator and of cooperating with each other in righteousness and piety, setting aside transgression and aggression.

In the Koran, God — praise be to Allah — emphasizes: “O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other” (*The Holy Koran, XLIX: 13*). The Almighty also says: “Be dutiful to your Lord, Who created you from a single person and from it created its mate and from them both created many men and women ...” (*The Holy Koran, IV:1*).

Muhammad — peace be upon him — says in this regard: “You all belong to Adam, and Adam is from dust ... No Arab is better than a non-Arab, except by piety”.

The second reality is that difference in beliefs and ideas is human nature, that beliefs are not traded, that each individual is born with his own creed, and that there is no compulsion in religion. Compulsion will not produce true believers, but only lying hypocrites. God alone is the one who calls people to account for their beliefs.

Many verses in the Koran reflect these concepts, among which is God's saying that “There is no compulsion in religion”. The Most Exalted also told his Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him: “... your duty is only to convey the message and on us is the reckoning”.

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The third reality is that difference in beliefs among people does not preclude their cooperation, mutual understanding, amity or exchange of benefits sanctioned by God Almighty. Human beings are civil by nature and cannot do without interaction with others.

States, also, cannot do without cooperation and interaction and exchange of interests with one another, particularly in our era, in which the world has become a global village, mainly owing to progress in transportation and communications through science and know-how.

Persistent efforts and the good offices of the United Nations General Assembly thus continue unabated to promote peace and security in the world, reducing frictions and differences among nations and preventing conflicts and hatred among peoples.

The fourth reality, as agreed by the wise, is that the divine religions revealed by God Almighty to his noble Messengers share two main cornerstones. The first is to worship God alone with devotion and the second is to maintain noble character. Any disagreement among them has to do with secondary issues, not the basic principles.

As this is the case, it follows that due respect ought to be paid to all honourable Messengers and that the guidance of religions should be pursued. Defamation of religions and assault on the honourable Messengers, therefore, do not emanate from sensibility, good nature or clear insight.

The fifth reality, as agreed by the wise, is that the Good Word works equally with friends and others. It works with friends because it adds to the amity and affability among them. God refers to His good servants by saying: "... and they are guided to goodly words and they are guided into the path of the God".

The good word also works with non-friends, as it serves to curb their anger and animosity. On this subject, God says:

"Tell my servants that they should speak that which is best; because Satan verily sows a state of conflict and disagreement among them; surely Satan is an open enemy to man." (*The Holy Koran, XVII: 53*)

The sixth reality, as agreed by the wise, is that since eternity there have been virtues that need to be

respected and vices that need to be avoided. The wise have concurred that justice is a virtue. God instructed by saying: "... when you judge between people, you judge with justice ...".

God also instructed by saying, "... and when you speak, then be just, though be it against a relative..." God instructed in testimony saying: "... and take as witness two just persons from among you, and establish the testimony for God ..." (*The Holy Koran, LXV:2*).

The wise also agreed that injustice is a crime that leads to great loss in this world and in the hereafter. God demonstrates this by saying: "These are their houses in utter ruin, for they were unjust ...".

All divine religions and human minds seek the promotion of justice and the rejection of injustice, for there can be no peace or security in the world unless we exert our utmost effort to stand strong for the virtue of justice until it overwhelmingly triumphs. We also need to stand firmly against the crimes of injustice until it is totally defeated.

The seventh reality, as agreed by the wise of all times and places, is that consolidating security and peace in any State is a blessing that leads to prosperity and increased production, thereby creating happiness and ensuring more affluence and progress.

When Abraham, peace be upon him, left his wife, Hajar, and his son, Ismail, in holy Mecca, the blessed lands, he asked God: "My Lord, make it a secure town and provide its people with fruits, such of them as believe in God and the last day ...".

The wise have also agreed to reject terrorism and aggression against people and the spreading of mischief in the land through annihilation and destruction of State institutions. The wise have agreed that this kind of terrorism is a religious and worldly tragedy. It is a religious tragedy because it explicitly violates the provisions of divine laws that call for the safeguarding of human life, people's property, their dignity and all their rights from all violations, and that consider the murder of one person as unjust and bad as the slaughtering of all people.

In this respect God says:

"... whoever slays a person, unless it is for a murder or for spreading mischief in the land, it would be as if he slew all humans; and whoever

saves a life, it would be as though he saved the lives of all humans ...” (*The Holy Koran*, V:32).

Terrorism is a worldly tragedy because terrorists attempt to tear apart a nation’s unity, destroy a nation’s wealth and economy and create national discord and spread horror and disruption wherever they go. Undoubtedly, whoever does this is, in fact, committing a crime against his or her nation, for which they deserve the harshest of penalties.

It is therefore incumbent upon us all, each in our respective fields, and it is the duty of the General Assembly and the Security Council, being the greatest citadels for peace, to stand together as one in the defence of security and curbing aggression and the fight against terrorism.

The eighth reality, as agreed by the wise of all times and places, is that the most appropriate way to settle conflicts and disputes among people is with constructive dialogue. By that, I mean dialogue that has noble goals and reasonable criteria. Those who moderate such dialogue must have positive insights, sound judgement, clear intentions and firm resolve so they can address difficulties with utmost patience. If a dialogue is to be held on religious grounds, it must focus on saving the oppressed, assisting the needy, promoting virtues and overcoming vice. Accordingly, every effort must be made to help our brothers in Palestine to fully realize all their rights.

The ninth reality is that every State has a distinct culture, just as the East, the West, the South and the North have their own cultures. The East should take what it considers most appropriate from Western civilization and vice versa, and the same applies to the South and the North. We believe in cooperation, complementarity and harmony among civilizations, and we disagree with those who believe in the clash, repulsion, incongruity and animosity among cultures and civilizations.

We support the decisions and recommendations resulting from the World Conference on Dialogue, held on 18 July 2008 by the Muslim World League under the auspices of His Majesty King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, and His Majesty King Juan Carlos of Spain. In that regard, we believe that the practical measures proposed by His Majesty the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques will enable us to attain all our objectives.

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): On behalf of the General Assembly, I wish to thank the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar of the Arab Republic of Egypt for the statement he has just made.

*His Eminence Mr. Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar of the Arab Republic of Egypt, was escorted from the General Assembly Hall.*

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): The Assembly will now hear an address by the former Prime Minister and Special Envoy of the President of the French Republic, who will also speak on behalf of the European Union.

*Mr. Alain Juppé, former Prime Minister and Special Envoy of the President of the French Republic, was escorted to the rostrum.*

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): I have great pleasure in welcoming His Excellency Mr. Alain Juppé, former Prime Minister and Special Envoy of the President of the French Republic, and inviting him to address the General Assembly.

**Mr. Juppé** (France) (*spoke in French*): Today, it is a great joy and honour for me to address the General Assembly on behalf of Mr. Nicolas Sarkozy, President of the French Republic, who is also current President of the European Union and whom I am mandated to represent at this plenary meeting of the Assembly on interreligious dialogue.

On behalf of France, I should like at the outset to thank His Majesty King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, who has undertaken the commendable initiative to promote interreligious dialogue on several occasions in recent months. The process launched in Mecca in June is enabling us to exchange views on this crucial issue today in New York within the framework of the General Assembly.

Through his initiative, His Majesty intended to invite believers to find sources of unity, rather than division, in their respective faiths and to take an enlightened view of all creeds, guided by mutual respect. We cannot fail to congratulate him on that. Holding regular meetings among representatives of various religions within the framework of an interreligious dialogue based on trust encourages tolerance with a view to peace. Such an approach helps to raise awareness about the ongoing problem of acts

of violence that, while perpetrated in the name of faith, only besmirch what they believe they are exalting.

Interreligious dialogue should thus enable us to reduce misunderstanding and bridge the gap between civilizations, whose religions can be an essential element of identity. France unreservedly supports such dialogue, first of all because our own experience since the Revolution of 1789 has caused us to develop a concept of secularism aimed solely at promoting peaceful coexistence among all beliefs and non-beliefs within the national community. From the French perspective, if interreligious dialogue does not retreat into exclusion, it is the useful and welcome international extension of a national asset that is viewed positively by the vast majority of French citizens and of those whom they welcome on their soil.

France also supports this initiative because one of the ongoing goals of French diplomacy — in particular since the attacks of 11 September 2001 — has been to prevent a whole range of factors from working together to give substance to the idea of a clash of civilizations. We formally dispute that idea, whose self-fulfilling nature could have disastrous consequences for international peace.

The States members of the European Union, on whose behalf I should now like to speak, have paid particular attention to His Majesty's initiative. Throughout their history, Europeans have had the often bloody experience of religious wars and interdenominational hatred. They have chosen to encourage intercultural and interreligious dialogue, which promotes human knowledge and understanding. The notions of tolerance, peacebuilding and peace consolidation lie at the heart of the European identity, as they enable people to organize themselves into political collectives that respect the religious, spiritual and philosophical identities of all parties. That is the message that Europe conveys within the Alliance of Civilizations, which was launched at the initiative of Spain and Turkey and whose objectives we fully support.

While we believe that faith is a matter of individual identity and choice, Europeans are convinced that religious communities can play a major, if not essential, role in promoting dialogue, fraternity, solidarity and peace. Interreligious dialogue must be as broad as possible. It must be able to bring together not only representatives of all religions, but also

representatives of all spiritual, philosophical and humanistic traditions in all their diversity and their many aspects.

As we prepare to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, respect for the universal values and principles of human rights is an essential pillar on which to build and strengthen interreligious dialogue. The recognition of unrestricted religious freedom in all its aspects, including the right to change religions or to develop a spiritual or humanistic approach other than religious belief, is an essential element of such dialogue.

In order to engage in dialogue, one must also be capable of listening to opposing views or even criticism. Recognizing the right to express oneself and to accept differing opinions is another essential element of dialogue. Freedom of religion is inconceivable without freedom of expression, even if it is sometimes used to deride; it is a condition *sine qua non* for interfaith dialogue. The only limits on such freedom are international law and the spirit of responsibility, which should be the guiding principle of every human being who is convinced of the supreme interest of peace, whether it be the internal peace required by every society or peace among nations.

Lastly, this dialogue should be free from all political involvement. Interfaith dialogue is the responsibility of the religious authorities, believers and representatives of spiritual, philosophical and humanistic traditions. No political movement, association or organization has the right to shape the debates or endorse the conclusions of any interfaith dialogue. The role of governmental or intergovernmental authorities should simply be to help create an environment in which such dialogue can take place.

Speaking again in my national capacity, I would like to emphasize that France is particularly committed to continuing this interfaith dialogue. His Majesty the King of Saudi Arabia is aware of the French President's views and convictions on this matter. He expressed them at the basilica of Saint John Lateran, in Rome, and reiterated them in Riyadh in his speech before the consultative council on 14 January, in which he said:

“It is not religious sentiment in itself that is dangerous, but rather when this sentiment is used as regressive political tool to commit new

barbarities. Do all of these excesses, all of these abuses, mean that we should condemn religion? Certainly not. Such a cure would be worse than the disease. Religious sentiment can no more be condemned on account of fanaticism than national sentiment can be condemned on account of nationalism.”

As everyone knows, in France, churches and the State are separate entities. Regardless of their personal views, our national authorities do not express preference for one faith over another. They respect all faiths and are committed to ensuring that everyone can freely choose to believe or not and can practice their faith in a dignified manner. We respect those who believe in heaven just as much as those who do not, and we strive to ensure that each person — whether Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Baha’i, atheist, agnostic, freethinker, freemason or rationalist — feels happy to be living in France, feels free and feels that their beliefs, values and origins are respected.

It is those very principles that guide France’s work in the international arena and that guide my speech today. I am of course aware of the wide diversity of perspectives, cultures and beliefs around the world, but it is my view that the best way to limit the conflict that arises between them is for public authorities, while carefully promoting mutual respect between different faiths and the necessary interfaith dialogue, to deliberately avoid becoming involved in a matter that is, above all, about the exercise of an individual freedom.

**Address by Mr. Deleita Mohamed Deleita,  
Prime Minister of the Republic of Djibouti**

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): The Assembly will now hear an address by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Djibouti.

*Mr. Deleita Mohamed Deleita, Prime Minister of the Republic of Djibouti, was escorted to the rostrum.*

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): I have great pleasure in welcoming His Excellency Mr. Deleita Mohamed Deleita, Prime Minister of the Republic of Djibouti, and inviting him to address the General Assembly.

**Mr. Deleita** (Djibouti) (*spoke in French*): It is with genuine pleasure and a tremendous sense of honour that I take the floor today before this august Assembly and that my country rises to the challenge of the generous invitation of His Majesty King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Custodian of the two Holy Mosques, in order to participate in this high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the culture of peace through dialogue among religions and cultures, the importance and prospects of which no longer need to be demonstrated. Allow me, first of all, your Majesty, to transmit to you the distinguished greetings of your brother, His Excellency Ismael Omar Guelleh, President of the Republic of Djibouti, who, for reasons beyond his control, is not able to be here beside you to participate in this important meeting.

The culture of peace, which has been on the General Assembly’s agenda since its fiftieth session, is today one of the most crucial issues for the international community. We are gratified by and support this unprecedented initiative of His Majesty King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Custodian of the two Holy Mosques, as it takes place after the World Conference on Interreligious Dialogue initiated in cooperation with King Juan Carlos I of Spain, held in July 2008 in Spain. These initiatives seek to establish a dialogue between Islam, Christianity, Judaism and any other belief or philosophy. They demonstrate courage and a strong political will to contribute in a meaningful and constructive manner to reconciling people through promoting dialogue among cultures and religions.

This is an important dialogue. It should serve to convey a genuine image of religion, and of ours in particular, by means of dialogue in order to counter the misunderstandings that are spreading throughout the world. Islam, which is a religion of peace, is today identified and associated with international terrorism, a barbaric phenomenon. We see today that this scourge is one of the most manifest obstacles to dialogue and peaceful coexistence among peoples. Clearly, this is a global phenomenon and it requires an organized and concerted international effort. We must confront this scourge together in a serious manner and with a sense of responsibility, justice and equity.

While we are convinced that we must work to combat terrorism in all its aspects and tackle it at the root, we must also work to overcome this phobia of anything relating to Islam. That attitude is on the rise, and it is undermining a genuine perception of our

religion and its principles of peace, tolerance and compassion. We must do all we can to prove that the recent accusations of violence and terrorism attributed to Islam are not justified.

We must, finally, explain that the Holy Koran advocates peace and not violence or war. It advocates tolerance and not fanaticism. It advocates love and not hatred. It advocates coexistence and respect for others.

Today, humanity is suffering from a loss of values and from great confusion about ideas. We are in a difficult phase. Intolerance, distrust and suspicion prevail among communities and peoples. What is causing this and, more importantly, what can we do? We can say here that the main cause is ignorance. Ignorance is what creates fear of others. Allow me to underscore the importance of dialogue and education in combating that phenomenon. Education and dialogue remain, in my opinion, the most important weapons in the struggle to overcome the vicious circle of ignorance and of the distortion of religious messages and concepts.

This is a permanent challenge, which every society and every citizen must face. Education and the culture of peace must become a constant concern within our societies, because this is what will lead to mutual respect, an essential prerequisite for constructive dialogue.

Every society has multiple identities today. We now understand that the concept of diversity is indispensable. Cultural diversity is the common heritage of mankind and the adoption of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions bears witness to that fact.

That plurality of identities is an asset from which we should draw pride and profit and which in turn fosters an openness toward other cultures, enabling mutual enrichment. In this context, tolerance takes on its full meaning, implying recognition of the respect for all cultures and their equal dignity and, at the same time, rejection of and fight against extremism and terrorism. This is why we are convinced that the culture of peace is the ideal avenue to bring about understanding and cooperation among people in order to attain peaceful coexistence among nations and that it is the best way of strengthening understanding and bringing peoples together. This is also why we believe that dialogue must be multiple and diverse and that it

must be carried out not only at the State level, but also and crucially at the regional and local levels in all parts of the world. A return to moral and religious values is an absolute necessity, as human beings cannot live without values, which can provide protection against all sorts of deviation.

I am gratified by the increasing recognition of the value of the culture of peace as a horizontal instrument that can help us build and strengthen bridges among civilizations and religions. It is our responsibility to inform the peoples of the whole world, community by community, that differences are not and must not be the source of conflict and confrontation. Of course, we do not all believe in God in the same way; of course, we do not serve God or worship God in the same way, but that reality does not mean that we should become opponents. Beyond the diversity of cultures, there remain fundamental values that are universal and are conveyed by all cultures, religions and philosophies, values such as moral integrity in speech and action, solidarity, tolerance and the search for virtue and wisdom.

If we want this historic meeting to be a success, it is imperative that we concentrate on the common foundations that unite us, that is to say, the belief in the noble principles and high moral values that constitute the essence of every religion. I am profoundly convinced that all religions, intended initially to guide and improve human action, must never serve as a pretext for the dissemination of hate and violence.

With globalization and new means of communications, all information is spread immediately throughout the world. We are increasingly interdependent, and our fates continue to become more intimately linked. This new reality, which is entirely different from the centuries of experience of our ancestors and our countries, should lead us to step up our efforts to preserve and protect peace and to advocate for tolerance and respect for others. More than ever, we must reaffirm the common universal values that are the foundation of our existence. More than ever, we must respect the diversity of people, beliefs and cultures and devote ourselves to the values of tolerance. More than ever, we must seize and cultivate every opportunity for dialogue in order to resolve and avoid any misunderstanding about our differences. It is by this means alone that we may distance ourselves from the spectre of the clash of civilizations and that we may achieve a responsible dialogue among civilizations.

*Mr. Beck (Solomon Islands), Vice-President, took the Chair.*

In conclusion, I would say that we are today at a decisive crossroads in our history. The path of integration seems difficult; it demands unfailing political commitment and will and intense effort, marked by patience and respect. However, it is only together and in solidarity, speaking with one and the same voice, that we will be able to achieve our objectives.

It is vital that we adopt strong, common positions against common threats, against the forces of evil, injustice and tyranny, while working with hope and optimism to build a better future, where the spirit of generosity and solidarity, as well as the values of morality and virtue, may reign.

To that end, we encourage the General Assembly to support and to endorse the conclusions of the Madrid World Conference on Dialogue, which strongly promote a culture of peace. May God help us and guide our steps.

**The Acting President:** On behalf of the General Assembly, I wish to thank the Prime Minister of the Republic of Djibouti for the statement he has just made.

*Mr. Dileita Mohamed Dileita, Prime Minister of the Republic of Djibouti, was escorted from the rostrum.*

**The Acting President:** The Assembly will hear a statement by His Excellency Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Chairman of the Senate of the Parliament of Kazakhstan.

*Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Chairman of the Senate of Kazakhstan, was escorted to the rostrum.*

**The Acting President:** I have the pleasure to welcome the Chairman of the Senate of the Parliament of Kazakhstan, His Excellency Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. I invite him to address the General Assembly.

**Mr. Tokayev (Kazakhstan):** Kazakhstan welcomes and supports the initiative of His Majesty the King of Saudi Arabia to convene this important forum at the United Nations. We have no doubt that such a universal organization as the United Nations has a pivotal role to play in ensuring peace, understanding and international security. The high representatives of

various States and regions that have come together in this Hall are motivated by the noble idea of holding an open dialogue among cultures and religions. Our common goal is simple and clear: to build a more secure and stable world.

The current situation in our world is complex and controversial. We in Kazakhstan hear with sincere regret the news of new victims of terrorism, wars and conflicts arising from xenophobia, religious intolerance and civilization's contradictions. At the same time, global challenges disregard racial, ethnic and religious differences. The threats they pose affect, to the same extent, all nations and peoples striving to live in peace and understanding, to make the world a better place for the sake of our children and to ensure for them a brighter future. Global challenges bring about the need for a large-scale global dialogue on the issues of intercultural and interfaith understanding. There is no alternative to mutual understanding, respect and tolerance. The time has come for statesmen and religious leaders to come together. We will be unable to protect the world from violence and chaos unless joint efforts are undertaken.

Nations will never give up their historical, spiritual and cultural identities. That is a right and natural development. Every culture, not to mention religion, has a legitimate right to freely exist and to be mutually respected. That is why, while recognizing and welcoming the variety of cultures, we should facilitate in every possible way the modern world's evolution towards a universal civilization based on common values of freedom, tolerance and understanding. The notion of unity in diversity is extremely relevant in the modern world.

As a nation where many ethnic groups and faiths have successfully coexisted for centuries, Kazakhstan stands ready to contribute to the development of the global dialogue of religions and cultures. Kazakhstan has historically been a place of interaction of great civilizations. A spirit of openness and cooperation has always been a part of the traditions and mentality of our people. Kazakhstan is the home country of an outstanding thinker of the Orient, al-Farabi, and an Islamic enlightener, Ahmed Yasawi. The remains of Father Sebastian, beatified by the Russian Orthodox Church, are also in my country. A Jewish sacred place, the grave of a Lubavitcher Rabbi, is located on our territory. Ancient Buddhist temples still exist on our boundless land. Many ethnic groups were exiled to

Kazakhstan during the totalitarian regime and all of them found the shelter and hospitality of Kazakhs.

Now, in a new historical reality, these ethnic groups have become the backbone of the unique institution that is our Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. The Parliament of Kazakhstan has passed a law granting special status to this organization as a centre for the interaction of all ethnic groups living in our country. The Assembly has been given an exclusive right to appoint its representatives as delegates to the Mazhilis, the lower chamber of the Kazakh Parliament.

Recently, the Parliament passed national legislation on the freedom of faith and of religious organizations. This legislation has been improved and amended to comply with international standards and experience drawn from practices abroad. Since our independence, only 17 years ago, 1,500 mosques, over 170 Orthodox parishes, more than 30 Catholic churches, 20 synagogues and over 1,000 houses of prayer and Protestant missions have been built in our country.

Since 2003, our new capital, Astana, has, upon the initiative of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, hosted two summit meetings of the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. This forum has become a unique Central Asian platform for dialogue among world religions. I would like to ask the representatives of the international community to offer their support to the third Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, which is to be held on 1 and 2 July next year in Astana, this time with the participation of the United Nations.

The title of the upcoming Congress, recently approved by its secretariat, is "The role of religious leaders in building a world of tolerance, mutual respect and cooperation". We will be delighted to welcome representatives of Governments and religious communities of countries from around the world as guests of the Congress.

We believe that these Congresses hosted by Kazakhstan do not contradict, but rather complement, similar forums held in other States. In this respect, Kazakhstan appreciates the efforts of Russia, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, Qatar, Japan, Greece, Italy and other States to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

Our country has joined the group of friends of the Alliance of Civilizations initiated by the Governments of Turkey and Spain. We will do our utmost to strengthen cooperation with the Alliance.

As was proposed by our head of State, the General Assembly declared 2010 to be an International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures. We call upon countries to take concrete actions through their national programmes to achieve positive results in this important interaction.

Kazakhstan is also planning to host a global forum on spiritual accord and dialogue among cultures. Last month, a ministerial forum entitled "Common World: Progress through Diversity", which brought together the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of over 50 States and representatives of international organizations, was held in our country. This meeting was an early tangible result in implementation of our initiative to promote dialogue between the Muslim world and the West.

Kazakhstan will chair the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010 and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in 2011. In preparation for its OSCE chairmanship, Kazakhstan has adopted a special programme entitled "The Path to Europe", which outlines specific tasks for broad interaction with the European countries and institutions in the economic, political and cultural fields. At the same time, as a secular State with a predominantly Muslim population, Kazakhstan has voiced its commitment to the ten-year Programme of Action of the OIC.

Kazakhstan has been consistently involved in strengthening the interaction of various cultures and civilizations, as well as in promoting active cooperation within international organizations in that area. Our national experience has shown that there is both an opportunity and a need for the rapprochement of different cultures and religions on a global scale. At the same time, Kazakhstan has demonstrated the practical value of the rapprochement process to ensuring and enhancing the social and economic progress of States.

Finally, I would like to thank Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and President of the General Assembly Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann for the timely and wise decision to hold this meeting, which will undoubtedly

be an important landmark in promoting the ideas of cooperation and dialogue.

**The Acting President:** On behalf of the General Assembly, I wish to thank the Chairman of the Senate of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan for the statement he has just made.

*Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Chairman of the Senate of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, was escorted from the rostrum.*

**Address by Mr. Salam Fayyad, Prime Minister of the Palestinian National Authority**

**The Acting President:** The Assembly will now hear an address by the Prime Minister of the Palestinian National Authority.

*Mr. Salam Fayyad, Prime Minister of the Palestinian National Authority, was escorted to the rostrum.*

**The Acting President:** On behalf of the General Assembly, I have the honour to welcome to the United Nations His Excellency Mr. Salam Fayyad, Prime Minister of the Palestinian National Authority, and to invite him to address the Assembly.

**Mr. Fayyad (Palestine) (spoke in Arabic):** At the outset, I wish to express our deep appreciation to the President for convening this important meeting. We are pleased and honoured to see him presiding over the sixty-third session of the General Assembly. I would also like, on behalf of His Excellency President Mahmoud Abbas, to express our deep gratitude to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, His Majesty King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, King of Saudi Arabia, for his noble and continued efforts in spreading the culture of tolerance and understanding among religions and for launching the international initiative to promote dialogue among religions and cultures.

I come to this Assembly from the land of divine messages to mankind, the land of Palestine, where tolerance has been rooted in the history of the Palestinian Arab people. Following in the footsteps of the Prophets that walked that blessed land and on the basis of complete faithfulness to the spiritual, civilizational and cultural heritage of Palestine that has embraced tolerance and coexistence among religions over the centuries, the Palestinian Arab people — Muslims and Christians — has preserved the culture of tolerance and coexistence, despite the historical

injustice that has been imposed on them for over 60 years. Indeed, the Palestinians have responded to every call to prayer from every mosque, church, and temple with a hymn of compassion, love and peace.

I come to this Assembly from Jerusalem and Bethlehem, cities of peace and love, which have embraced and nourished coexistence throughout the ages, and whose people suffer today from the pain of isolation and the cruelty of siege, walls, discrimination, and from the destruction of their homes and even the confiscation of their cemetery lands. They look to this Assembly to bring an end to the shackles of occupation and injustice that have brought nothing but hatred, fear, intolerance and mistrust.

Our world is still suffering from all forms of religious extremism and racial discrimination and foreign occupation, which are the causes of hatred, extremism, intolerance and bigotry, which are contrary to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, which calls for joint efforts to strengthen international relations and provide capacities for building an exemplary human society. That, in turn, requires the expansion and deepening of dialogue and its affirmation as a civilized means for cooperation, security, peace and well-being.

Despite the passing of more than 63 years since the adoption of the Charter's call for tolerance, coexistence and peace on earth, many peoples throughout the world continue to suffer from the pain of irrational and irresponsible practices and policies, which are governed by a sense of the arrogance of power and racial, religious or ethnic superiority.

On the other hand, the forces of good in all religions have always challenged those calling for extremism, confrontation and superiority. The forces of good have succeeded in many cases in confronting those abhorrent phenomena and have contributed to the success of the model of coexistence, thus helping to maintain international peace and security and promote friendly relations among nations and peoples based on mutual respect for the equal rights of peoples, including the right to self-determination.

Therein lies the importance of this noble initiative for dialogue among religions and for religious tolerance as represented by the mosaic of human diversity and necessitated by the sum of human experience, which has proven that civilizations have

not arisen in human history without having interacted with other civilizations.

*The President returned to the Chair.*

That is what has enabled humanity to formulate the common value of coexistence, which calls for freedom and equality among all human beings, regardless of their race, religion or culture, and for the establishment of justice and peace in the world. Indeed, tolerance and coexistence among religions is a prerequisite for human life and coexistence among human beings.

In order to preserve this noble human prerequisite, which all religions have called for, we must promote and deepen dialogue aimed at achieving peace among human beings, avoid conflicts, suppress all acts of aggression and arrogance, ensure respect for the differences among religions, cultures and civilizations, and encourage the quest for positive interaction between civilizations, cultures and religions.

It is incumbent on all Member States, collectively and individually, to work hard under the aegis of the United Nations to uphold mutual respect among religions, to maintain the right to religious belief and human dignity, and to consolidate full equality of rights through the promotion of a culture of tolerance and understanding.

The only means to achieve this is through dialogue in a framework of international relations, and by addressing the root causes that fuel intolerance and extremism in all their forms. We must also work to raise communities based on real religious tolerance and non-discrimination of religion, race, colour and gender.

We must also respond decisively to the phenomenon of the defamation of religions and their symbols and to those who claim the inevitability of a clash of civilizations. There must be a cessation of defamation and stereotypical caricatures of peoples.

In this context, we emphasize the importance of the Mecca Appeal issued by the International Islamic Conference for Dialogue, held in June 2008 under the auspices of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, His Majesty King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, and the Madrid Declaration of the World Conference on Dialogue of July of this year.

The international community is faced with an overall responsibility and a great challenge to respond firmly to all the abhorrent phenomena that undermine coexistence. It must formulate policies and approaches that ensure compliance with covenants and treaties and which will relegate this dark side of human history to the dark and painful past, rather than have it continue to threaten our present and future. There can be no choice but to overcome those abominable phenomena and their promoters and put an end to them, because the consequences of failure would be catastrophic for the future of all humankind.

As we speak about religious tolerance, we must speak about Jerusalem, the city of peace, the land of prophets, the first of the two qiblas, and the third holiest shrine in Islam, the place of the ascension of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and the place of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, peace be upon him.

The Holy City has suffered from occupation for over forty-one years. During this time, it has been subjected to a series of practices and violations aimed, in essence, at altering its character and status. Some examples of this are the harassment of its Palestinian inhabitants, as well as of Muslims and Christians, attempts to force them to abandon Jerusalem, and the imposition of a fait accompli on the ground that threatens the prospects of achieving an agreement on the final status of the Holy City.

The Security Council, the General Assembly and other organs have adopted numerous resolutions on this topic, all of which have reaffirmed that any measures taken by Israel, the occupying Power, to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration on occupied Jerusalem are illegal, null and void and have no validity whatsoever. Those resolutions have also called for the cessation of all violations of the sanctity of Jerusalem.

Regrettably, however, none of those resolutions have been respected or implemented. On this occasion, we therefore emphasize that any situation where holy places are being violated or where one group or religion attempts to impose control, regardless of the pretext, is unacceptable. Continued silence in the face of such an unjust situation threatens the foundations of religious tolerance and serves only to escalate conflict and create more intolerance and hatred.

This makes it imperative for the international community to give Jerusalem and its inhabitants the

protection they deserve, to address all illegal practices that contravene the principles of justice and rules of international law, as well as to provide protection for the city and its unique spiritual, religious and cultural status, as envisaged in the relevant United Nations resolutions on this issue. Such support will undoubtedly ease tensions, fears and hatred, while encouraging dialogue towards the achievement of the desired goals of freedom, peace and tolerance.

Nothing that has been said from this rostrum or in any other forum about Jerusalem can change the historical fact that East Jerusalem has been an occupied Palestinian territory since 5 June 1967 or can obviate the necessity of applying relevant resolutions of international legitimacy, particularly with regard to the Israeli withdrawal from the city and the rest of the occupied Palestinian territories.

The choice of the Palestinian people, as affirmed and detailed in the 1988 Palestinian Peace Initiative, is that East Jerusalem is the capital of the future independent Palestinian State. The Palestinian people thus expect the international community to provide urgent and effective assistance to put an end to the occupation and to enable them to exercise their legitimate rights, at the forefront of which is the right to establish their independent State with East Jerusalem as its capital with the 1967 borders. This will pave the way for ending intolerance, hatred and racism and is the key to peace, security and stability throughout the region.

Such an achievement will ensure freedom for all peoples of all religions and nationalities to permanently and freely reach the holy places. This is what the Palestinian people, Muslims and Christians, have been accustomed to throughout history and they look forward to its continuation for the benefit of all believers of all monotheistic religions.

This is a commitment made by the Palestinian people in the 1988 Declaration of Independence, as well as in the constitutional principles governing the work of the Palestinian National Authority. Today, we renew this commitment before you.

The walls of the old city in East Jerusalem encompass the minarets of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the bells of the Church of the Nativity and these, along with every stone, rock and corner in its streets and quarters, represent the summation of the city's enormous capacity for hosting coexistence among

civilizations and cultures and is a source of hope for its inhabitants in ending the occupation.

Do not let this hope — amid the pleas of Um Kamel Al-Kurd for the restoration of her home, which was confiscated by the settlers — or the hope of all mothers in the Holy City diminish. This is our responsibility.

The suffering of the Palestinian people continues unabated, in terms of displacement, exile, confiscation of land and water resources, the unprecedented escalation of settlement activities, their subjugation to settlers' terrorism and the imposition of severe siege, particularly on the Gaza strip, where the freedom of more than 1.5 million people is curtailed. This reality jeopardizes international efforts to establish peace on the basis of the two-State solution along the 1967 borders, a solution that received international consensus support and the economic, political and moral endorsement of the international community.

This requires intervention to ensure that all parties implement United Nations resolutions and adhere to the principles and foundations of justice and the provisions of international law. I am sure that Member States understand the results and repercussions of inaction, not only as it affects the Palestinian and Israeli peoples, but also as it concerns the whole region, as well as international peace and security. That which must also be understood is what the Arab Peace Initiative provides in terms of broad prospects to end the conflict in our region and to achieve peace, security and harmony.

This matter should prompt us all to step up our efforts and to make a serious commitment to settling this decades-long conflict, to putting an end to the longest occupation in modern times and to enabling our people to realize our right to self-determination and to establish our independent State, with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital, on the basis of the 1967 borders. This would pave the way for real possibilities for cooperation and coexistence. It would consolidate the principles of tolerance and close this tragic chapter, thus enabling our people to build its own future and actively contribute to the progress and prosperity of humankind.

When a representative of Palestine spoke for the first time from this rostrum, he, the late President Yasser Arafat, raised an olive branch, a symbol of peace in the land of peace. The olive branch is deeply

rooted in our land as a symbol of coexistence and tolerance. Today, I would like to reaffirm to this General Assembly his message as included in the Declaration of Independence of the State of Palestine. In two days from now, we will commemorate that Declaration, which was drafted by the late great poet Mahmoud Darwish, the poet of Palestine and humanity, whose body was embraced by the soil of Palestine as he was bid farewell by old and young people of Palestine as a symbol of our nationalism and national culture.

I reaffirm here and now that the people of Palestine, Muslims and Christians alike, aspire to peace and justice and are committed to the principles of peaceful coexistence. We will continue to work responsibly and, to the extent possible, with all nations and peoples to achieve a lasting peace based on justice and respect, a peace in which humankind's potential will flourish to build and achieve everyone's well-being and prosperity, where competition will enhance the creativity of life and where there will be no fear of tomorrow, because we believe that tomorrow will bring, above all, safety for those who follow justice and not its opposite.

In conclusion, I wish to assure this Assembly that we will continue to make every effort to move from being a victim of history to a participant in its making, for the benefit of humankind and for the broader prospects of humanity. We are confident that this Assembly will assist us in our endeavour.

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): On behalf of the General Assembly, I wish to thank the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority for the statement he has just made.

*Mr. Salam Fayyad, Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, was escorted from the rostrum.*

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to Her Excellency Ms. Elizabeta Kancevska-Milevska, Minister of Culture of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

**Ms. Kanceska-Milevska** (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia): Allow me to begin by thanking you, Sir, for convening this high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly. The significant participation of dignitaries demonstrates the ongoing desire to promote dialogue and cooperation among

religions and cultures. To this end, I would also like to thank the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for initiating this gathering and playing an important role in strengthening our joint efforts.

Last September, from this same rostrum, I said that the core of the cultural tradition of the Republic of Macedonia lies in its openness towards other cultures. Its international cooperation is thus oriented towards promoting the values of its heritage. Despite a number of challenges, I trust that the Republic of Macedonia may serve as an excellent example of how intercultural, inter-ethnic and interreligious dialogue and understanding can be maintained and promoted at the national level. I am deeply convinced that the sharing of experiences and learning from each other is our obligation, and this multilateral gathering provides the best framework to spread this message — a message for the culture of peace.

In this regard, I would like to inform the Assembly that last year in Ohrid, the Republic of Macedonia hosted the World Conference on Dialogue among Religions and Civilizations. The Conference, which gathered together hundreds of political and religious leaders and intellectuals from around the world, provided an opportunity to openly discuss how to generate further political will to eliminate common misconceptions and stereotypes among different religions and cultures. This includes continuous education in fundamental human values that are common to all religions and cultures and establishing new channels of communication and dialogue. The declaration adopted at the Conference was communicated as an official document of the sixty-second session of the General Assembly under the agenda item entitled "Culture of peace". The follow-up Conference will be held in 2010, and we expect a strong involvement of all who are present here.

The convening of that significant World Conference in the Republic of Macedonia represented a follow-up to several important regional forums and conferences held in our country. These included a South-East European Regional Forum of heads of State on Dialogue Among Civilizations, held in August 2003 in Ohrid under the auspices of President Boris Trajkovski and co-presided by the Director-General of UNESCO, Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura, in the framework of the United Nations and UNESCO Decade for dialogue among civilizations; a conference on Balkan interreligious dialogue held in May 2006 in Ohrid; and

the Third Ministerial Conference on Cultural Heritage in South-Eastern Europe on the topic "A Bridge towards a shared future", convened in cooperation with the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in November 2006 in Ohrid.

I also wish to stress the importance that the Republic of Macedonia attaches to the Alliance of Civilizations. We became a member of the Alliance's Group of Friends in April 2007.

All of us present here are aware that we need to strengthen our political action to deal with all divisions, exclusions and deviations from the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other fundamental instruments related to human rights, and to promote our diversity into an effective tool of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. I therefore wish to reaffirm our appreciation and support for the objective of the Alliance to contribute to bridging polarization between societies and cultures.

I would like to emphasize that respect for cultural diversity is at the core of the activities of the Ministry of Culture and in the Office for the protection of cultural heritage, along with their cultivation, presentation and development. Our annual programmes on culture and the law of culture, which have a civic dimension, are a good way to promote that goal. It is only through open and ongoing dialogue established under the full and mutual respect for diversity and the values of others that peace can be preserved, common aspirations realized and the highest ideals of the modern world followed.

Cultural diversity represents treasures and advantages, because diverse cultural traditions have great creative and artistic potential. At the same time, they represent instruments of peace, mutual understanding and respect. The guarantee and accomplishment of the cultural rights and equality of national and ethnic groups in each country are a guarantee of stability and sustainable development of society. That is why the Republic of Macedonia adopted UNESCO's important Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, and we are marking the sixtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with several activities. The Republic of Macedonia has decided to co-sponsor the draft resolution proposed by the Philippines and Pakistan, as it has done previously with similar texts.

Let me conclude by expressing our confidence that the deliberations we are holding today will mark a significant step forward in our common endeavour to achieve our objectives by identifying ways and means forward and by bringing together and building an effective network and partnership of major stakeholders.

Culture is an area to which great attention should be devoted and it must not be neglected under any circumstances. The Government of the Republic of Macedonia devotes great attention to culture and the processes connected to it in our country, and devotes great energy and means towards its improvement and development. We are working on increasing the interest in our national cultural values and interests by establishing an efficient financial system based on a strong foundation that includes criteria, priorities and principles based on the European standards.

The cultural policy of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia is based on the political, economic, social and human development processes of the country and is fully consonant with its global policies.

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. E. Ahamed, Minister of State for External Affairs of India.

**Mr. Ahamed** (India): I am deeply honoured to represent India at this important meeting. India welcomes the initiative of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, His Majesty King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia, to promote a high-level interfaith dialogue. In the context of today's challenges, His Majesty's effort to spread understanding and goodwill among the peoples of the world is both very timely and highly commendable. It will enable us to better work together in a genuine partnership for a peaceful and equitable global order.

Just as a genuine partnership is based upon better understanding, the foundations of such better understanding are built on goodwill, tolerance and receptivity to differing viewpoints. A true partnership derives from a willingness to engage with each other in a dialogue based upon equality and mutual respect.

In India, we strive in our daily lives in a million different ways to practice such a dialogue of equals. That is an indispensable part of the process of building our nation as a shared endeavour. Such a dialogue is

more than merely a conversation over issues of importance — it lies at the very core of our national existence.

For millennia, the Indian subcontinent has provided shelter to countless strands of religious and philosophical thought and it is very much part of our historical tradition to accept all religions and spiritual experiences as true and valid. India is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Sikh and the Jain faiths; while the great teachings of Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism quickly found fertile ground on our shores. Today, every one of the world's major religions has a home in India, making it a nation of unparalleled diversity.

Thus, Islam has flourished on our subcontinent for over 1,300 years, and modern-day India has 150 million members of the ummah. Put another way, today approximately one in 10 Muslims worldwide is an Indian. Christianity, too, came to our shores shortly after its birth in the holy lands. Indeed, the Christian tradition reached India well before it reached most other parts of the world. Similarly, the Jewish and Zoroastrian people have an ancient history of having freely and peacefully practiced their faith in India.

Interreligious and intercultural dialogue is not new to India. The first philosophical dialogue between India and the West goes back to the time of ancient Greece. As Islam found a home in India, it became part of the dialogue of our civilization. From that dialogue came new philosophic ideas, as well as an entire structure of Indo-Islamic culture. Not only is that culture represented in the historical record of the art and architecture of our subcontinent; it also flourishes today in numerous spheres.

The quest for dialogue also found an echo in the life and works of the father of our nation, Mahatma Gandhi, who viewed receptivity to other cultures and traditions as a source of strength and cohesion for any society. To quote the Mahatma,

“I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible”.

The historical tradition of dialogue in India has drawn upon respect for knowledge and a willingness to question, as well as a desire to learn. Thus, for instance, the Buddha urged his followers not to accept

his beliefs without questioning them. That philosophic tradition of questioning ideas is based on our recognition of the consequences of allowing belief to become blind faith. It finds expression even in the Indian Constitution, which declares our nation to be a secular republic and simultaneously underlines the freedom of both religion and faith, as well as the duty of the State to inculcate a scientific temper among the people.

While faith and belief sustain us in our search for answers to existential questions, in our daily lives we also recognize the importance of science and a scientific temper, rational and liberal social practices, and economic growth and productivity to help us improve the lives of our people. It is for that reason that newly independent India valued factories and universities as much as it did its places of worship, seeing them as the temples of modern India.

The State that I hail from in India, Kerala, is an outstanding example of the tradition of promoting dialogue and understanding that is to be found in my country. Throughout the ages, Kerala has witnessed the peaceful comingling of different cultures and religions. Kerala was the State where Arab Muslim traders first arrived as messengers of the Islamic faith. The village of Methala, near the city of Cranganore in Kerala, hosts the first mosque to be built in the Indian subcontinent, the Cheraman Juma Masjid. It was constructed around A.D. 629, during the lifetime of the Holy Prophet, peace be upon him.

Our history also records that, in A.D. 52, St. Thomas, one of the 13 apostles of Christ, brought Christianity to Kerala, landing on its shores in a ship owned by a Jewish merchant. The ship docked at a port which was home to a large trading settlement of Jewish and other people, including from Rome, Syria and elsewhere. Indeed, it was in Kerala, too, that the Jewish people built what is now one of the oldest synagogues in the world. Today, the population of Kerala is almost equally divided among Hindus, Muslims and Christians.

Dialogue among different cultures and religions is also important because it is precisely in the absence of such dialogue and understanding that intolerance, bigotry and violence flourish.

This is one reason why extremist ideologies, violence and terrorism have grown in a world in which we seem to be moving away from dialogue and

understanding. There can be no disputing the fact that terrorism, which is a manifestation of extremism, intolerance and violence, is the antithesis of all religions. All acts of extremism and intolerance run counter to the central teachings of any religion, as all faiths are based on the universal values of peace, goodness and humanity. No religion condones violence or the killing of human beings.

In India, we are disturbed by the rise of intolerance worldwide. We are troubled by the increase in resources, financial and otherwise, that are being made available to violent and intolerant groups that misuse religion to justify and propagate their extremist agendas. The effort to counter such tendencies diverts attention and much-needed resources from development efforts in a country like ours. Moreover, the destructive activities of such groups can have potentially serious consequences to social stability, peace and tranquillity.

It is therefore increasingly urgent that the nations of the world come together to tackle such evils. Modern societies cannot and should not tolerate extremism and violence. Those who consciously or unconsciously abet extremism and terrorism would be well served to remember that these are monsters that may not readily go away.

We need to send out a clear message emphasizing the importance of tolerance for the faiths and beliefs of others. The United Nations Charter states that the peoples of the United Nations are determined to practice tolerance and live together in peace. We need to emphasize the responsibility of Member States to do all in their power to promote tolerance and respect. Eventually, however, we will need to build a larger platform based upon tolerance, which emphasizes the fundamental equality of all cultural traditions, religions and faiths, and the essential truth that all human beings are equal before their creator.

The world is home to such a diversity of faith and culture that proactive dialogue-based initiatives are essential to ensure better understanding between peoples. Such dialogues should expand mutual comprehension and reduce misunderstandings and misgivings. Indeed, they should aim to celebrate the infinite diversity that makes up our world.

I would like to conclude with a quotation from the revered saint and social reformer of Kerala, Sri

Narayana Guru. In a message to the All Religious Conference held in 1924, he stated that:

“This great Parliament of religions makes it abundantly clear that the ultimate goal of all religions is the same, so there is no need for followers of different religions to indulge in mutual conflict.”

**The President** (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Carlos Morales Troncoso, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Dominican Republic.

**Mr. Morales Troncoso** (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): First of all, I would like to congratulate those who have promoted today's meeting in this forum, where all conflicts between belligerent national groups or between nations come to be discussed, on the subjects of dialogue and the culture of peace. We would especially congratulate the head of the Spanish Government, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, for his idea of the alliance of civilizations and for having presided over the first forum on this subject.

I would also like to thank the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in the person of King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, for his proposal to convene interreligious dialogue, and this Organization for holding this event and for having given the greatest attention to the subject of the dialogue among civilizations since it was put forth more than 10 years ago.

We also welcome the initiative of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to designate a High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations.

To our mind, there is no doubt that the peaceful world to which we aspire will be an achievable goal only when those subjects dominate all agendas for debate among neighbours, countries, Governments and the governed, leaders and the followers of all religions and among the representatives of all cultures.

If we live in a world of conflicts, we must look for the reason in our having abandoned the culture of dialogue or in our erroneous conceptualization of its use or objectives. We often see groups undertaking dialogue for purposes that it cannot serve, as a strategy for domination or as a pretext for imposing their will on their interlocutors.

Dialogue is not the imposition of our beliefs, points of view or culture on others. Dialogue is the

most effective of the efforts at understanding for the establishment and strengthening of relationships of cooperation, tolerance, and, above all, mutual respect. Dialogue provides a means of examining our differences, sharing ideas, breaking down mistrust and promoting the togetherness that arises from accepting the diversity characteristic of all human beings.

That is why we should not only engage in dialogue here, but also promote it as a way to solve the problems we face as individuals or nations, in a world so interconnected that the most geographically distant conflicts always resonate on a global scale.

Promoting dialogue means fighting for respect for human dignity and human rights, since the state of peace — to which we all aspire — is one in which human beings live in conditions of justice and respect for their fundamental rights. If we promote dialogue and achieve a culture of peace, all our nations will fulfil one of the greatest responsibilities that they undertook when they became Members of this Organization: the commitment to nothing less than the peaceful settlement of all conflicts.

All of us recognize the calamitous fact that conflict, like fire, must always spread. All of us recognize the calamitous fact that conflicts, like natural disasters, tend to cause death, to destroy nations' productive resources, to paralyse economies and to plunge nations into insecurity and despair. That is a reality that we witness daily and see repeated almost habitually, aggravating political, economic, social or environmental situations that already impose untold hardship and suffering on various peoples.

How fortunate, then, that promoting dialogue is one of the central points on our agenda. We are convinced that it is only through dialogue that we can hope to achieve the ideal of living in a world of peace. Why? we all ask ourselves. Because dialogue will always bring us closer together, enable us to hear what others have to say and help us to understand the reasoning of others, to understand them and to accept them as they are. Understanding and acceptance will lead to coexistence, and coexistence will always enable us to live in peace.

It does not matter if the religions that bring us closer to God ritualize the practice of their faiths in different ways or use different holy books. Ultimately, we are all members of one family, the human race, and God the Creator is only one. We know that there are

also exclusivist religious fundamentalisms whose proponents act out of the conviction that only they have a monopoly on transcendent spiritual truths. However, religion, which is the means through which every human being communicates with God, is inherently opposed to discrimination, violence, hate, hostility and conflict.

*Mr. Beck (Solomon Islands), Vice-President, took the Chair.*

Who can claim to speak truthfully if he says that he loves God and hates his brother? My country, the Dominican Republic, trusts that the World Conference on Dialogue will be as fruitful as its promoters hope it will be and that it will become the harbinger of an era of understanding, cooperation, compassion and peace that will lead us to a world in which liberty and justice prevail over all things.

While such a world would be without violence, discrimination and conflict, however, it would not be a world of stillness or one in which all of us would find ourselves in a permanent state of contemplation. As history has shown, human beings are always fighting. That is why we wish to conclude by repeating the words of the illustrious Latin American intellectual Germán Arciniegas, who proposed that if there is to be peace, it must always be an active peace.

**The Acting President:** I now call on Her Excellency Ms. Carina Christensen, Minister for Culture of Denmark.

**Ms. Christensen (Denmark):** First of all, I would like to thank the President of the General Assembly for convening this important meeting. I would also like to thank the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for promoting the initiative of this important event. Denmark highly appreciates efforts to foster interfaith dialogue. The attendance of an impressive number of participants at today's meeting demonstrates the commitment of many nations to its objectives.

The Danish Government places great emphasis on increasing intercultural dialogue and understanding in order to ensure the dynamic and peaceful development of international relations. Interreligious dialogue is an integral and indispensable part of that effort. The Danish Government therefore supports several interfaith dialogue initiatives in Denmark as well as abroad. Denmark is actively taking part in the Asia-Europe Meeting Interfaith Dialogue process and

attended the Asia-Europe meeting held in Amsterdam in June. The Danish Government also actively supports various interfaith dialogue initiatives led by the Danish Church. This summer, a delegation from Afghanistan made an interfaith dialogue visit to Denmark, and Danish churches helped to organize an Iraqi reconciliation conference in Denmark in February.

Denmark attaches particular importance to promoting dialogue among young people. In today's ever-changing world, we need to consider carefully what we are conveying to future generations. Education is perhaps the single most efficient path towards the peaceful handling of cultural and religious diversity.

Education should place stronger emphasis on commonly shared values, such as tolerance; mutual understanding; respect for cultural, ethnic and religious diversity; the protection and promotion of universal human rights, including the rights of religious minorities; and adherence to non-violence and the principles of peaceful coexistence. For that reason, Denmark was proud to host the Copenhagen Conference: "Education for Intercultural Understanding and Dialogue" in October. The Conference was organized and sponsored by an impressive group of international and national organizations committed to the objective of the Conference, including UNESCO, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization, the Council of Europe, the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures, the Danish Centre for Culture and Development and the Alliance of Civilizations.

One of the three main themes of the Copenhagen Conference was exactly how to combat stereotypes about religions and beliefs in our educational systems. And we sincerely hope that the expert recommendations stemming from the Conference will serve as an inspiration for practitioners throughout the world, as we hope today's meeting will do too.

It is important that we, as responsible leaders, promote tolerance and mutual understanding to avoid conflict and hatred between peoples just because they have different cultures, different beliefs and look different. If not we, who else?

When it comes to building bridges across cultures and religions, Denmark attaches the highest importance to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as other international human rights conventions. The setting today reminds us that principles such as the freedom of expression and the freedom of religion or belief should be the basis of all initiatives aimed at promoting intercultural and interfaith dialogue.

**The Acting President:** I now give the floor to His Excellency The Honourable Kerry O'Brien, Senator and member of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade of Australia.

**Mr. O'Brien (Australia):** Nothing is more important to our future and to the well-being of our respective peoples than encouraging a global culture of peace. Australia is committed to the proactive pursuit of peace and understanding, including through a range of policies and initiatives that encourage positive relations between and among peoples. In this respect, Australia continues to attach great importance to interfaith cooperation as a means of promoting mutual respect, understanding and tolerance among different religions and cultures across our region.

Earlier this year, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, said:

"Some say there is no place for faith in the twenty-first century. They are wrong. Some say that faith is the enemy of reason. They are also wrong, because faith and reason are great partners in our human history and in our human future."

For the United Nations, this is a historic day. To have the leaders of different faiths coming together to talk about the need to utilize these different beliefs towards a better world is an occasion that will be remembered. The challenge now is to transform this into real outcomes affecting people's lives.

We warmly welcome the leadership of the Philippines and of President Arroyo herself today in promoting the United Nations Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace, which seeks to enhance understanding among civilizations, cultures and religions. Australia has now been accepted as a member of the Dialogue and looks forward to participating fully in its future meetings.

Australia also commends the role played by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and King Juan Carlos of

Spain in promoting the inaugural world interfaith dialogue in Madrid from 16 to 19 July 2008. That event brought together nearly 300 religious leaders, scholars, clerics and representatives from many major faiths, and we welcome those who have come here today to New York as well.

The resulting declaration on interfaith dialogue from Madrid embodies powerful themes — the idea of a dialogue of civilizations, the common values and ethics of religions and humanity, and the fundamental importance of respect, tolerance and understanding — that resonate with the hope of people around the world to live peacefully in harmony.

Australia is an active supporter of the Parliament of the World's Religions, one of the largest interfaith gatherings in the world. Through the periodic meeting of the world's spiritual and religious communities, that process aims to foster interreligious understanding and cooperation. In 2009, Melbourne will host the next meeting of the Parliament.

In addition to these processes, Australia is committed to the work of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, and joined its Group of Friends in 2007. The Alliance of Civilizations is an international initiative to combat extremism by promoting cross-cultural and religious understanding with a focus on projects in the areas of media, youth, education and migration. In January 2008, Australia welcomed the opportunity to attend the inaugural Annual Forum of the Alliance in Madrid. Australia and the European Union co-hosted a Youth Interfaith Forum in Australia in December 2007 in recognition of the important role young people need to play in furthering peace.

At a regional level, Australia has taken a lead role in fostering interfaith cooperation through the Regional Interfaith Dialogue, a process which we co-sponsor with Indonesia, New Zealand and the Philippines. The dialogue aims to bring people from diverse faith groups together in order to promote understanding between communities in the region and to focus the attention of religious leaders on their potential role in strengthening moderate voices within their communities.

The diverse mix of religions and cultures in South-East Asia means that the region's leaders are uniquely placed to build trust and understanding between various religious and ethnic groups. But while Governments can and should play an important role in

facilitating dialogue and understanding, it is religious leaders themselves who are best placed to work within their communities to build bridges at a community level. By the same token, however, it is the responsibility of all those in the community, including political decision makers, to apply a values-based dialogue to all their activities.

The Regional Interfaith Dialogue, through the strong support of regional Governments, has done this by providing the platform in which faith and community leaders come together to share their experiences. Australia would like to pay tribute to the Governments of Indonesia, the Philippines, New Zealand and Cambodia, which have hosted the first four Regional Interfaith Dialogues. Australia looks forward to hosting the fifth Regional Interfaith Dialogue in 2009.

While the development of these regional and international initiatives has been enormously positive, Australia is also working domestically to strengthen social cohesion by enhancing respect, ensuring fairness and creating opportunities for participation in community life. It is not just between nations or even between communities within those nations that we must foster peace and understanding, but within those communities as well.

Australia's national action plan to build on social cohesion, harmony and security aims to build community resilience against the threat extremism through initiatives promoting interfaith and intercultural education in schools, community cultural development and sporting activities, and human rights and anti-discrimination education. Over 150 initiatives have been supported through the programme, including the establishment of a National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies.

The promotion of intercultural understanding and social harmony is of critical importance for this and future generations. Australia looks forward to continuing its work on interfaith dialogue and community cohesion, both domestically and with our international partners. Through this process, we hope to engender an enduring global culture of peace, tolerance and diversity.

What is happening here today cannot simply be left to stand on its own. We must show how a broader understanding among cultures can address longstanding international disputes and differences,

internal conflicts and the oppression of the weak and powerless.

It is encouraging to hear world leaders today address this forum from a values-based perspective. However, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian, who paid with his life for standing against the Nazi State and the Holocaust, once said, “obedience to God’s will may be a religious experience, but it is not an ethical one until it issues in actions which can be socially valued”.

In that spirit, we particularly welcome the President of Israel’s positive statement today in relation to the Arab peace initiative as “a serious opening for real progress”. We hope this opportunity will be seized and endorsed by all. But one word of warning: the fanatics standing against us, spreading hate, will not be easily deterred. Those of us advocating the way of peace must demonstrate that we are even more determined.

**The Acting President:** I give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya.

**Mr. Ettalhi** (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya) (*spoke in Arabic*): At its sixty-first session, the General Assembly adopted resolution 61/221, entitled “Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace” and affirmed in paragraph 1 of that resolution that: “mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue constitute important dimensions of the dialogue among civilizations and of the culture of peace”. This was reaffirmed at the sixty-second session of the General Assembly in resolution 62/90. The Assembly also adopted resolution 61/269, entitled “High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace”.

In accordance with this significant trend and with the continuing concern of the United Nations in this area, we welcome the convening of this high-level meeting today. We are convinced that there is a pressing need to intensify the dialogue between religions and cultures and to pursue this dialogue as a tool to implement the goals of the United Nations, as enshrined in the United Nations Charter and reaffirmed by the 2005 World Summit Outcome.

At the outset, we would like to commend the great efforts made in this regard by the United Nations,

in particular by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and several regional and subregional organizations. Particular praise is due to the Alliance of Civilizations, initiated by the Governments of Turkey and Spain under the auspices of the United Nations. We believe that these two countries, by dint of their history and geography, are well-qualified to play an influential role in the dialogue between religions, civilizations and cultures.

We believe that the world is now in a critical stage, at which it is imperative that we come to an objective and true understanding of each other. Over the past three decades, since the end of the cold war, we have witnessed significant events — which I will not mention here — that have led to many distorted ideas, and elements of the distant past are coming to the fore once more.

Unfortunately, that has influenced the political actions of some people, resulting in violence, destruction and untold suffering in many parts of the world. We must recognize first and foremost that the principle victim — though not the only one — of those events and the reactions to them, particularly after 11 September 2001, has been Islam and Muslims in general. Regrettably, this is not the first time in history that Islam has been targeted as a result of misunderstandings, misconceptions or prejudiced propaganda, but this decade has witnessed an unprecedented intensification of Islamophobia. Perhaps the first Observatory report of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, presented at the eleventh session of the Islamic Summit Conference in Dakar, gives us the clearest and most honest assessment of this phenomenon. To quote that report:

“One of the major issues facing present day international relations is the issue of Islamophobia. Islamophobia has existed since the time of inception of Islam. However in recent years, the phenomenon has assumed alarming proportions and has indeed become a major cause of concern for the Muslim world. Defamation of Islam and racial intolerance of Muslims in western societies are on the rise. The Muslim world is particularly concerned because, while the overwhelming majority of Muslims strictly adhere to the principles and teachings of peace and tolerance and are against any form of terrorism or extremism in Islam, these vested groups of Islamophobes are giving a negative

portrayal that Islam and Muslims are supportive of terrorism and extremism.”

This is one of the bitter facts that we should recognize as we launch this dialogue. The report of the Secretary-General (A/63/365) provides further evidence of this.

We believe, as we meet today, that the key to mutual understanding is dialogue. Islam is a continuous invitation to dialogue. Documents such as the report of the high-level working group of the Alliance of Civilizations, issued in November 2006, the Amsterdam declaration on interreligious dialogue and the Astana declaration, issued in October 2008, provide new ideas that should be considered and represent efforts that deserve encouragement and support. We welcome all of these initiatives and call for their continuation.

We acknowledge the words of a Moroccan researcher, who said:

“The causes of tension and conflict are not cultural differences, as long as they are simply value systems and visions for the world and for lifestyles. Instead, they are hegemony and the wish to dominate.”

The causes of tension and conflict in the world today arise from the fact that there are people who want others from other civilizations and cultures to become carbon copies of them. In practice, this means a rejection of dialogue and a quest for domination, which can lead only to further tension in international relations and is inconsistent with the spirit of serious, constructive dialogue.

Lastly, beginning in the 1980s, Libya was among the first countries to host numerous meetings for dialogue between religions, and we appreciate all initiatives and efforts to further and deepen the dialogue. We issue a sincere call for the acceptance of diverse beliefs and respect for such diversity. Libya believes that it is of the utmost importance to gain understanding of other religions so as to deepen our understanding of social and humanitarian realities. Such knowledge can lay the foundation for mutual understanding, constructive coexistence and cooperation, so that we may create a world in which peace can be built on justice and progress.

**The Acting President:** I give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of Guatemala.

**Mr. Rosenthal** (Guatemala) (*spoke in Spanish*): My delegation welcomes the convening of this important dialogue to promote and implement the Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace and to foster dialogue and cooperation between religions and cultures.

In thanking the presidency for organizing this meeting, we wish to express our appreciation to King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud for his important initiative, reflected, among other things, in the event celebrated in Madrid last July and now in this meeting, aimed at promoting a dialogue between religions and cultures. This initiative undoubtedly will encourage nations to come together in the best spirit of the Charter of our Organization and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also complements the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which affirms that, as a value indissolubly linked with respect for the individual, intercultural dialogue is the best guarantor of peace.

I come from a country where we are too familiar with the tragic outcome of intolerance, be it the result of ethnic, religious, social or ideological differences. One of the pillars of the peace accords that put an end to almost four decades of fratricidal conflict was the creation of a multi-ethnic, pluricultural and multilingual society. This determination, which shapes our domestic policies, also orients our foreign policy. That is why we attach such value to the recent initiative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to promote dialogue and, in a different context, to contribute to a firm, just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

The culture of peace is without a doubt a strong tool that should be disseminated en masse, which requires strengthening education. It is for this reason that, in the Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace, it is the first measure we need to promote among the eight spheres of action identified. We must begin by eliminating lies that incite hatred, distortions, prejudice and negative bias in school textbooks and other written educational material. The objective of promoting respect for different religions and cultures must be incorporated into the message of these books. Education must be at the service of understanding, tolerance, mutual respect and coexistence.

On the other hand, our religious and cultural diversity must be considered as a valuable asset of our societies and an engine for development and progress.

In my own country, the peace accords contain very concrete provisions that defend the Mayan cosmology and protect Mayan sacred sites.

In our delegation's opinion, closely linked to the first sphere of action that I mentioned earlier is the need to update and revise education and cultural policies to reflect a human rights-based approach, guarantee equality between men and women, encourage democratic participation, and promote understanding, tolerance and solidarity so that all these spheres of action impact favourably on sustainable economic and social development, with respect for cultural diversity.

In the area of education, we reaffirm that UNESCO must be the lead agency within the United Nations system to promote and implement the Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace. The General Assembly has recognized that this should be the fundamental expression of its mandate as the coordinator of the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World (2001-2010). The decade should not end in 2010, but should become a way of life in peace and without violence.

Cultural diversity has rightly been elevated to the category of common heritage of humanity; it is a living heritage, and therefore renewable, as established by the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, the adoption of which was a clear example of our categorical rejection of any thesis that predicts an inevitable clash of cultures and civilizations. In this context, we appreciate the fact that in June of 1996, our Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, was appointed UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for the promotion of a culture of peace, in recognition of her struggle for ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples and for her dedication to the ideals and objectives of the Organization. The adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples also paid tribute to the inherent value of human diversity.

Guatemala has also supported initiatives such as the Alliance of Civilizations, the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace and the Manifesto 2000 for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence, which has already been signed by over 75 million persons. All of those initiatives and the groups that head them are a testament to the importance of dialogue, the rejection of the abuse of religions by extremist groups fomenting

racism, discrimination, xenophobia and all related forms of intolerance. As the President of the General Assembly at its sixty-second session said, "Unless religions are part of the solution, they will continue to be part of the problem" (A/62/PV.19, p. 44).

Finally, we believe that 21 May, declared World Day for Cultural Diversity, and 21 September, the International Day of Peace Day, should be better acknowledged so that their celebration can serve to disseminate knowledge about other cultures, thus paving the path towards peace and security throughout the world without discrimination of any type and with justice and equality. As the Culture of Peace Manifesto 2000 states, we can "transform — all together — the culture of war and violence into a culture of peace and non-violence".

**The Acting President:** I now give the floor to the representative of Switzerland.

**Mr. Maurer** (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): I wish to thank the President for having convened this meeting. I also thank the Secretariat and all stakeholders involved in the excellent preparations for this debate.

What do we mean when we say dialogue? To begin with, it means something that only has meaning and purpose if it creates a relationship among people who think differently. We must understand dialogue as an exercise that consists of negotiating with people who do not share the same values as we do. That dialogue drives transformation because it changes the way a person perceives and interacts with others. It changes the political dynamic.

Next, to engage in dialogue, one must be able to give and to receive; there must be something to give to the other person. That means knowing one's own origin and it means understanding how our history and geography have shaped us. In order to have a dialogue, one must have the humility to receive without believing that you represent the high point in history and without seeking to return your interlocutor to the straight and narrow path. Anyone who believes that he or she is the sole possessor of truth, goodness and beauty is not capable of dialogue.

Throughout its history, Switzerland has learned that peaceful coexistence among various cultures requires the shared determination to focus on what

unites us in practice, rather than on what separates us ideologically.

We have learned and continue to learn to live with cultural and religious differences. We have thus developed a pragmatic political culture focused on the well-being of our citizens. Democratic referendums, the protection of minorities as well as the ongoing search for compromise have been instruments crucial to the unity of our country.

The primary responsibility of peaceful coexistence lies with each State and each citizen. That responsibility begins at home. It cannot be delegated or replaced by international dialogue among religions, or as the President of the General Assembly said this morning at the 46th plenary meeting,

*(spoke in English)*

“we are not gathered here to talk about religion or theology ... We are here today to pledge to place our reserves of moral strength at the service of the goals of the United Nations”.

*(spoke in French)*

The job of ensuring respect for religious and cultural diversity is not just a question of political will. It is part of the broader context of the smooth functioning of the rule of law and the principles that govern it: non-discrimination, freedom of expression, freedom of thought and freedom of religion or conviction.

We appreciate the fact that religious and political leaders are talking with each other and trying to understand each other, however within the context of our policy of promoting human rights and peace, Switzerland has noted that dialogue among religious leaders has rarely led to success. For that reason, we conduct not intercultural or interfaith dialogues, but political dialogues that due to their nature, involve religious or cultural factors. Those dialogues take place with political actors — even those who may have religious convictions or be vested with religious authority — that have de jure or de facto political responsibility. In that manner, Switzerland supports processes to transform conflicts in which religious factors are intermingled.

Accordingly, Switzerland gives it full support to the initiative for an Alliance of Civilizations. The initiative takes into account the political dimension of

interreligious or intercultural tensions and seeks to find practical solutions to such differences.

Today, we must be unified in our efforts and share the responsibility to work together, in spite of and because of our differences, to make our world a better world. Basically, it was a humanitarian message — a message of humanity — which gave birth to modern Switzerland and continues to provide the essence of our foreign policy which we pursue from within the Organization.

**The Acting President:** I now call on His Excellency Mr. Jan Henningsson, Senior Adviser of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden.

**Mr. Henningsson** (Sweden) *(spoke in Arabic)*: On behalf of the Government of Sweden, I wish at the outset to warmly welcome this commendable and noble initiative undertaken by His Majesty King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. No one doubts that future historians will consider these two days devoted to dialogue among cultures as a dialogue of good faith in favour of peace. We all know that this commendable meeting within the United Nations General Assembly was the result of the laudable initiative and appreciated efforts taken by others working within the realm of the possible and practical.

I should like to tell you of a very important project, namely, a cooperative effort by the United Nations and religious organizations in the form of a dialogue that was established last month in Istanbul under the guidance of Ms. Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, the Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund.

In addition, we could refer to a UNESCO project, “The Image of the Other”, which is integrated into school curriculums, particularly in European and Arabic school books. This project has been going on for four years now and is being carried out in cooperation with the League of Arab States and a certain number of European partners.

We would like to take this opportunity to voice our profound appreciation for the efforts made by the United Nations aimed at restoring trust among the peoples of the world, in particular, through encouraging initiatives that stem from the Muslim world.

**The Acting President:** I now call on His Excellency Mr. Frank Majoor, chairman of the delegation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

**Mr. Majoor (Netherlands):** The Netherlands Government welcomes this opportunity to address the contribution of interreligious dialogue to achieving a culture of peace.

I would like to align myself with the statement delivered by Mr. Alan Juppé on behalf of the European Union (EU). Indeed, the EU has been built on the culture of peace after years of war, built on a set of values and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflict through dialogue and negotiation. The EU presidency mentioned three important characteristics of fruitful interreligious dialogue.

Let me add, on behalf of my delegation, three remarks. First of all, we should not forget that interreligious dialogue is just one of many forms of dialogue. As stated in the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief: "religion or belief, for anyone who professes either, is one of the fundamental elements in his conception of life." I would like to emphasize here the words "one of". People have multiple identities. They may be Christian, but they are also men or women. They may be Muslim, but their cultural background can be Arabic or Malay. They may be Hindu, but they are also artists or journalists. In other words, interreligious dialogue, important as it is, is only one form of dialogue.

As is advocated by the Alliance of Civilizations, we should also welcome dialogue on the basis of political, social, economic and cultural identities. All these different forms of dialogue together will help in advancing a culture of peace.

Secondly, the Netherlands Government has facilitated interreligious dialogue on several occasions. This year, the fourth Asia-Europe Meeting Interfaith Dialogue was held in Amsterdam. Participants had very useful discussions on interfaith dialogue and poverty-reduction, on religious education, on communications in the digital world and many other subjects.

The focus was on the practical aspects of dialogue. Thus, on the first day of the meeting, participants visited a number of projects in Amsterdam where people with different religious and belief

backgrounds worked together to improve the lives of many in Amsterdam.

Very often, dialogue that goes hand-in-hand with practical forms of cooperation is more effective. In working together with others, people get connected and discover that despite different religious backgrounds, they may have, or actually have, a lot in common. They will find that most religions share a number of universal concepts and that these concepts do not conflict with, but support human rights and fundamental freedoms. On that basis, it appears possible to establish and maintain alliances to bridge gaps and to really work together.

In the same spirit, the Netherlands Government supports the Interreligious Conference "Faith in Human Rights", which is being organized by a Dutch non-governmental organization, Justitia et Pax, and will be held in the Peace Palace in The Hague on 10 December. The organizers hope that religious leaders, representing many different religions and beliefs around the world, will sign a declaration expressing their support for human rights and especially for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Netherlands Government is pleased to note that the Universal Declaration has become a source of inspiration, not only for Governments, but also for our societies at large, and we are looking forward to the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of this milestone Declaration, both in this Hall and in The Hague.

The third point I wanted to broach is that Governments are facing huge challenges: economic, social and environmental, to name just a few. The time has past when Governments alone could solve all current problems. We need the help of many parts of our societies. We need the help of business, of youth and, indeed, of religious or belief communities.

We see such communities first and foremost as groups of individuals. In our legal system, both at the national and international levels, we deal with the rights and freedoms of individuals. An individual can raise her or his voice and explain his or her position.

However, it would not be possible to point to the authoritative voice on behalf of religion. Every religion, even if it has the hierarchical system, has different tendencies and interpretations. It is impossible for a judge to determine whether the rights

of a religion or belief, per se, have been violated. Whom should he or she turn to in order to find out?

The Netherlands Government, therefore, does not support calls for the legal protection of religions or beliefs as such. We should, however, protect the rights and freedoms of individual believers, by making sure that they can manifest their freedom of belief freely.

For the same reasons, the Government of the Netherlands is sceptical about establishing at the United Nations a new advisory body of representatives of the religious movements in the world. How would it work? Its work fits within the larger framework of the Alliance of Civilizations. Who is going to determine which religious movements should be represented? And who is going to decide who will be representing any religious movement? Considering that the United Nations does not make any distinction between religion or belief, how do we define belief in this context? To what extent can we hear the voices of those who have no religion at all? There are so many practical difficulties that my Government fears that, in the end, the setting up of such body will produce more problems than it will be able to solve.

Interreligious dialogue is important, especially if it includes many religions or beliefs, does not lead to exclusion of others and is always seen as part of a

broader context of dialogue between peoples with different identities. I hope and trust that religious leaders will continue their efforts to make their dialogue inclusive and practical so that the objectives of the United Nations will be promoted by such initiatives.

In this respect, the Government of the Netherlands welcomes a number of initiatives taken this past year, and it hopes that they will prove to be inclusive, practical and durable. The Government of the Netherlands will continue to facilitate interreligious dialogue, bearing in mind, in the words of Mr. Juppé, that the interreligious dialogue itself is the responsibility of religious authorities, of the believers and the representatives of spiritual and humanist traditions.

#### **Programme of work**

**The Acting President:** Before adjourning the meeting, I would like to inform members that the President of the Republic of Bolivia, His Excellency Evo Morales Ayma will address the General Assembly on Monday, 17 November, at 12.30 p.m. in the General Assembly Hall.

*The meeting rose at 5.55 p.m.*