

4 October 2007

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Srgjan Kerim,  
President of the 62nd Session of the General Assembly,  
at the High-Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural  
Understanding and Cooperation for Peace**

Secretary-General,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Delegates,

Welcome to the first High-level Dialogue of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace.

By convening this event, the General Assembly has taken an important stand. We are reaffirming the values enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But more importantly, we are taking concrete steps to advance these values around the world.

During the General Debate Heads of State and Government from all regions placed great emphasis on the value of tolerance and mutual understanding. This demonstrates the commitment of the international community to promote these values.

In particular, I would like to acknowledge the Delegations of Pakistan and Philippines for spearheading this initiative, which is complementary to and builds upon other initiatives, undertaken by the United Nations, including the Alliance of Civilizations.

Excellencies,

We live in unprecedented times. Cultures and religions are being pulled ever closer together by a web of telecommunication and economic links. While contributing to the richness of our human experience, these encounters also reveal deep rooted misunderstandings. However, in this era of globalization we have the unrivalled opportunity and responsibility to replace intolerance and discrimination with understanding and mutual acceptance.

Open and sustained dialogue, respect for freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief is fundamental to this endeavor.

The United Nations has a crucial role in promoting such a dialogue, and advancing the fundamental freedom that we must all respect Others' religions and beliefs. In doing so, we should also recognize that a crime committed in the name of religion is the greatest crime against religion; and that religion should not be used as a pretext for war.

In this regard, there were several recommendations that emerged from the General Assembly's thematic debate on "Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace", held earlier this year, including;

that we must acknowledge the legitimate rights of Others to assert their identity if we want to have meaningful dialogue;

that religious leaders have a duty, drawing on the principles of their own faith, to promote mutual understanding and tolerance in their communities; and,

that there are already many helpful tools available to promote positive encounters among people of different cultures.

To this end, we should all become instruments of peace. We must begin a global Dialogue, using public campaigns and all forms of media, to spread greater awareness of the issues.

Governments can play an additional role by adopting educational curricula that instill values of peace and tolerance. Children are not born with prejudice, it is learnt.

Together, it is our common challenge to eliminate all distorted notions that deepen barriers and widen divides: for they all originate in the discriminatory practices of the mind.

We can achieve this through a multi-faceted dialogue that promotes unity in diversity, and replaces misunderstanding with mutual understanding and acceptance.

The success of this global Dialogue also rests on the active involvement of the media, private sector, civil society, faith groups and NGOs. Their insights and outreach will be instrumental in helping to achieve our goal.

That is why I am delighted that later this afternoon, the General Assembly will hold an interactive hearing with these important stakeholders. All Member States are invited to participate.

Excellencies,

Next year we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Still, many people feel that their rights are not respected.

In some regions, many people feel their dignity has been violated; that internationally agreed principles and values are not equally applicable to all. These issues cut to the core of the perceived lack of justice and the political instability in the world today.

To make peace some people believe that you need to forget.

From my own experience, I would suggest that reconciliation is a fair compromise between remembering and forgetting.

The only means to achieve this is through intensive dialogue: at both the political as well as the cultural and social level.

Promoting human dignity, and equal access to rights and opportunities, constitutes the cornerstone of this conversation.

Here, I would like the great Dante Alighieri to speak. He said: "The greatest gift that God in his bounty made in creation, and the most conformable to his goodness, and that which he prizes the most, was the freedom of the will, with which the creatures with intelligence, they all and they alone, are endowed."

Going forward then let us each respect the uniqueness of each others perspective, so that together we can honor the rich diversity of humanity.

Thank you.