

8 October 2007

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

Excellencies,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by congratulating you all for the stimulating discussions that we have had over the past two days.

In particular, I would like to thank our distinguished Panelists', and representatives from civil society, NGOs, faith groups and the private sector for enriching the debate.

Collectively we must now go forth and strive to build a new culture of international relations based on human rights and security, mutual cooperation and respect for international law.

This dialogue on Interreligious and Inter-cultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace is an important avenue to achieve this goal.

We have already taken an important step in this direction by adopting the Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In doing so, we have recognized the inherent value of human diversity.

The spirit of cooperation and mutual respect that has been displayed during the High-level Dialogue is something that the General Assembly can continually strive to exemplify.

As we have witnessed during this debate, sincere dialogue is an extraordinary tool to promote inclusiveness.

During this session and beyond, we should demonstrate our sincere willingness to tolerate all views, to search for common ground and avoid using platforms such as this for political purposes.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

Globalization has brought us all closer together and has made us aware of the religious and cultural diversities. It has also exposed the differences between us.

One consequence of this has been to ‘exoticize’ difference; another has been the exploitation of religion for political ends, often with violent consequences.

As one participant noted, "Unless religions are part of the solutions, they will continue to be part of the problem".

Without exception, all speakers recognized that interfaith and intercultural understanding formed the bedrock of our social well-being, stability and prosperity.

Diversity is an inherent part of human civilization. Programs to establish uniformity around a particular ideology, religious or otherwise, have all failed.

During the debate we heard many examples of different religious communities that have lived in harmony over the centuries.

Many also noted that intolerance, disrespect and extremism were on the rise and linked this to unresolved international conflicts, social and economic injustice.

In this regard, a number of participants called on the international community to do more to find sustainable solutions to conflicts in the Middle East, Darfur, Iraq, and Kosovo: noting that lasting peace can be achieved by promoting better intercultural and interfaith understanding.

Many also called for the full and timely implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, and the strengthening of human rights institutions.

Extremists and terrorists who further their political interests by misrepresenting religion were denounced by all. As well as spreading violence these groups and individuals also spread ignorance and misunderstanding.

Similarly, several delegations also noted the conflation of ethnic identity and national identity or citizenship as a tool used to spread instability for political ends.

The prominent role of mass media was acknowledged as an essential element in promoting greater interreligious and intercultural understanding.

In this regard, many noted that there was an important balance to be struck between freedom of expression and the responsibility of the media to respect cultural and religious sensitivities.

A number of delegations have put concrete proposals on the table to address these and other issues. I do not have the time to do justice to all these recommendations now. However, they are recorded in your written statements that will be available on the United Nations website.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen

I was honored to open the interactive hearing of the General Assembly which allowed for an open discussion with distinguished representatives of civil society, including non governmental organizations, academia, foundations and the private sector.

I would again like to again thank and acknowledge all those who participated in the hearing, in particular, for drawing our attention to the practical measures to advance interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation.

The focus on programs for youth, media and education, as well as innovative partnerships with the United Nations coincided with many of the views expressed by Member States.

Recommendations such as adapting school curricula and teacher training to emphasize multicultural knowledge and awareness were stressed, as well as increasing opportunities for international student exchange programmes.

Another important message, as we approach the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights is to promote respectful and inclusive dialogue, especially for minority communities.

I was particularly interested to note the various concrete experiences of successful dialogues on the ground that involved parties with credibility and trust at the grassroots. Some of these were made possible through effective collaboration with the private sector. Systematically collecting and disseminating these best practices would further our efforts and enhance coordination.

I was encouraged by the large participation of Member States in Thursday's hearing, and welcome the interest of the General Assembly to continue this meaningful interaction with civil society on this issue and others.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is clear that there is much more that unites us than divides us. As the Chairman of the delegation of Pakistan noted, the Holy Quran says;

“Ethnic diversity is only for the sake of identity.”

No matter what religion, creed or culture, the human family shares a common yearning for peace, prosperity and happiness.

Open and sustained dialogue, respect for freedom of expression and religious belief, are fundamental to our endeavor to promote a culture of peace.

Religion is, and should be, a source of inspiration to achieve these goals. No religion has a superior claim to truth. We all need to acknowledge and respect the pluralism of views and beliefs that exist.

These values are enshrined in the founding Charter of the United Nations and if fully implemented would establish a new culture of international relations based on peace, tolerance and mutual respect.

While the United Nations is an excellent forum for dialogue, we must not stop here. If we want to promote this dialogue we should go back and spread the message in our communities and neighborhoods throughout the world.

We should all become examples of tolerance and mutual understanding in our daily lives.

If we want the world to change, we must first embody the change that we want to see in the world.

Thank you.