

14 February 2013

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić,
President of the 67th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Opening of the "United for a Culture of Peace Through
Interfaith Harmony" Special Event**

Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

At the beginning, allow me to express my deep appreciation to UNESCO and the Committee of Religious NGOs for joining me in hosting this event, entitled “United for a Culture of Peace Through Interfaith Harmony.”

I would also like to thank all of the Permanent Missions and Observers that have lent their support to today’s proceedings, as well as to all the NGO groups that have helped in the organization.

I wish all of you a very warm welcome to the General Assembly.
There is a passage from the Book of Psalms that I would like to share with this distinguished audience. I hope it can help set an adequate tone for this morning. Chapter five, verse eleven, reads: “Let all those who put their trust in You be jubilant [...]; spread Your protection over them, so that those who love Your name may rejoice in You.”

I chose to share this with you in part because every religious tradition has a version of this teaching—that man is right to put his faith in the Almighty, in His divine plan and redemptive power. For millennia, such beliefs have helped to sustain the human spirit, through conflicts and strife, famine and pestilence.

They have helped people of faith overcome privation and conquest, as wars continued and nations rose and fell and struggled to rise anew.

I sincerely hope they will help lift your hearts and steady your resolve, as you continue carrying out your important work in the service of peace.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The United Nations was established as a result of the historic victory over fascism. Its founders undertook to set up—for the first time in history—a workable international system that aspires to justice, pledging not only equal rights to all nations, but ensuring their equal dignity as well.

Each Member State was given a seat around the high table of peace, in the expectation that one day swords may indeed be turned into ploughshares. It is here, in this very Hall, where dialogue was

endowed with greater value than force, and where freedom of religion became a standard—as expressed in by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose 65th anniversary we will mark later this year.

Regrettably, our world is still characterized by too much confrontation, intolerance, and recurring warfare.

Manifestly, some of the aspirations of the UN’s founders still need to be realized.

This certainly appears to be a tall order. But the holy books of our respective religious traditions remind us what may well happen when we look beyond the first obstacle on the road, and to the future with hope, faith, and imagination.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my view, the United Nations can greatly benefit from further engaging with religious leaders from around the world who advocate the path of peace.

Many UN agencies are already recognizing the importance of strengthening partnerships with faith-based groups. UNESCO is one—the General Assembly another.

Three years ago, in this very chamber, the Member States established the annual World Interfaith Harmony Week, through resolution 65/5. It “encourages all States to support, on a voluntary basis, the spread of the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill [...] based on love of God and love of one’s neighbor [...], each according to their own religious traditions or convictions.”

Last year, my predecessor as President of General Assembly, H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, held the Week’s inaugural celebration in this hall, under the banner of “Common Ground for the Common Good.”

Today’s event builds on that theme, by aiming to foster harmony amongst religions, as a foundation for establishing a global culture of peace. It also draws inspiration from the High-Level gathering that took place during last September’s General Debate on a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence.

In its wake, the General Assembly adopted two important resolutions that have helped to raise the visibility of this year’s celebration. The first—67/106—was entitled “Follow-up to the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace;” and the second—67/104—was titled “the Promotion of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace.”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe that people of faith should genuinely focus on the core ethical tenets we hold in common.

We ought to re-embrace the calls of our respective faiths for individuals to show respect for all and compassion for the most vulnerable, notwithstanding their differences, in recognition of God’s image not only in ourselves but in everyone else—however they may worship and wherever they may live.

Let us reach out to one another, on equal footing, and truly work on healing the wounds of centuries of conflict between peoples of different religions—vigilantly mindful of the danger that the ills and grievances of bygone centuries—if they continue to be reawakened—can engulf us in a maelstrom of unmatched ferocity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, we are humbly taking a small step towards overcoming strife and hatred in the name of religion, advancing efforts for this august body to truly become an Assembly of Peace—in adherence to what a great statesman once described as “the better angels of our nature.”

I come to the end of my remarks by echoing the words of a man whose profound spirituality and belief in social justice continues to give hope to individuals across the world that faiths can work together in the service of humanity, Mahatma Gandhi.

“All the religions of the world,” he said, “while they may differ in other respects, unitedly proclaim that nothing truly inhabits this world but Truth. [...] Let the first act of every morning [therefore] be to make the following resolve for the day:

I shall not fear anyone on Earth.
 I shall fear only God.
 I shall not bear ill-will toward anyone.
 I shall not submit to injustice from anyone.
 I shall conquer untruth by Truth.”

Thank you for your attention.