

27 February 2013

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić,
President of the 67th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Fifth Global Forum of the United Nations Alliance of
Civilizations**

Your Excellency Mr. Ban Ki-moon,
Your Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani,
Your Excellency President Heinz Fischer,
Your Excellency Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,
Your Excellency Foreign Minister José Manuel García-Margallo y Marfil,
Your Excellency Vice-Chancellor Michael Spindelegger,
Your Excellency High-Representative Jorge Sampaio,
Your Excellency Ambassador Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser,
Distinguished Heads of State and Government,
Respected Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great privilege to address the Fifth Global Forum of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations. I take this opportunity to thank our Austrian hosts for their exceptional hospitality, as well as to express my heartfelt appreciation to the Governments of Spain, Turkey and Qatar for their strong commitment to this important initiative.

I would also like to congratulate my able predecessor as President, Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, who will take over stewardship of the Alliance during this Forum. I look forward to our continued friendship and cooperation, whilst remaining at his disposal for any assistance the General Assembly may provide.

I would also like to pay a well-deserved tribute to Jorge Sampaio, for his tireless efforts over the past five years.

Finally, allow me to emphasize my sincere gratitude to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, for his unfaltering leadership in dealing with the great many complex issues that humanity faces.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The first stated goal of the United Nations is to enable peoples “to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors.”

This noble aim traces its origins back to the very dawn of our civilizations. It is written in the Qu’ran that Allah “made mankind into nations and tribes from a single man and woman, so that they might

[get to] know each other,” whilst the Bible is telling us that “from one blood, He has made every nation to live together all over the earth.”

Reminding us of our common lineage, these sacred words direct us to live in harmony with each other.

It is one of humanity’s most important bequests. Yet we all know how sorely it has been tested, time and again, in the succeeding generations.

The enmity and suspicion that regretfully exist in many quarters stand in stark contrast to the divine message of our respective faiths.

The world is beset by a series of ruptures that seem to be building in intensity, whose effects can barely be kept in check.

We must be aware of the growing danger of what the ills and grievances of bygone centuries can inflict upon us, if they are not adequately addressed.

That is why I have selected bringing about the adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations by peaceful means as the overarching theme to frame the work of the 67th Session of the General Assembly, providing continuity with the efforts of His Excellency Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser.

One of the most important events on our calendar will take place in early summer. I have chosen to convene a High-level debate in New York on Culture and Development on June 12th the first time this topic will be the focus of such a discussion in the plenary hall of the United Nations.

Inspired in part by the Alliance’s groundbreaking Intercultural Innovation Project, the goal of this interactive discussion is to emphasize the central role of culture in fostering sustainable development at all levels.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Just as this part of the world was the primary setting of international politics throughout the 20th century, the Greater Middle East is becoming the ultimate theatre of significance for the 21st.

What happens in the part of the Mediterranean basin which opens like a fan to the south and east of its ancient shores, has become pivotal to the security and well-being of the entire planet.

Two great Middle Eastern tragedies persist before the eyes of the world: the bloodbath of Syria and the plight of the Palestinian people.

In my view, the way in which they are addressed will significantly affect the trajectory of the unfolding dialogue between civilizations.

Succumbing to the despondency of the status quo is a prescription for a disastrous future of growing estrangement, multiplying crises, and uncontrollable revendications.

The perpetuation of the civil war in Syria has become the most horrific humanitarian catastrophe of our times.

It is unconscionable that for close to two years, the international community has failed to put a stop to the carnage.

Just a few days ago in Geneva, I addressed the UN Human Rights Council and extended a strong appeal to bring the fighting to an end.

Today, I call again for an immediate cessation of hostilities. Halting the violence must be our foremost priority. It has to be followed by a political process that would enable Syrians to freely determine the course of their lives.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For nearly seventy years, the quest to fulfill the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people has remained on the UN's agenda like an open, bleeding wound. Millions of refugees scattered in camps throughout the Middle East continue to live in desperate search for relief.

This is one of the world's most fundamental wrongs and it demands immediate redress.

On November 29th, 2012, I was privileged to preside over a historic session of the General Assembly, when the Member States voted by an overwhelming majority to accord to Palestine the status of a Non-member Observer State to the United Nations.

However, as it was made clear on that day by both sides, it is no substitute for the achievement of a just and comprehensive settlement that will enable Israel and Palestine to live side by side in peace and security.

I fervently hope that the stage will soon be set for the negotiations to resume in good faith, and for the reconciliation between two proud nations to begin in earnest.

Now is the time for all who can bring the parties closer together to help build a bridge over the chasm.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

By combining our strengths, I believe we can bring about a world that looks to the future with optimism, proud of its diversity, and secure of its prospects.

The Alliance of Civilizations may become a critical part of such an endeavor.

Established as a soft-power tool of preventative diplomacy, it has no doubt contributed to overcoming differences and tensions within and amongst different cultures, faiths, and societies, all the while guarding against the erasing hand of uniformity that some fear could be a consequence of globalization.

It is my deeply-held view that enlarging the common denominator of values and principles which bind us to each other truly serves the cause of peace. We should all work hard with the Alliance on finding ways to put our diverse identities in its service.

A man who spent much of his life in this great city, Sigmund Freud, once said that “civilization began the first time an angry person cast a word instead of a rock.”

As our deliberations in the Fifth Global Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations begin in earnest, let us take this thought to heart. And let us remember the Almighty endowed only mankind with the capacity for reasoned speech and that, more than any other human trait, the ability to communicate in an orderly and thoughtful way is what enables us to try to amicably settle our differences.

Thank you for your attention.