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49th plenary meeting

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Official Records

President: Mr. D'Escoto Brockmann (Nicaragua)

In the absence of the President, Mr. Siles Alvarado (Bolivia), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.05 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)

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of Singapore.

Mr. Menon (Singapore): Globalization has connected us all together more closely than ever before. All over the world, people of different religions now live and work together in mixed societies. Diversity is a byword both religious and cultural, which in turn raises important questions about how religions and cultures can and should interact. We should consider ways to facilitate dialogue because the map of the world should never be colour-coded based on our different religious identities.

In this regard, interreligious dialogue has become an important way for people of different religions to engage with one another and to build mutual trust and understanding. The roots of such dialogue can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, when the

World's Parliament of Religions was held in the United States. The interreligious movement has gathered momentum since then and has become increasingly important and relevant in recent years.

Religion is a highly personal and spiritual matter. It can evoke the deepest responses and convictions of a person, to the extent that perceived differences sometimes become too difficult to bridge. Therefore, it is understandable that some peoples and communities may not be comfortable with the idea of interreligious dialogue and interaction. Although different religions may preach similar moral standards and values, differences between religions can be very real and distinct. However, in today's world, where our lives are so deeply intertwined, we cannot afford to be ignorant of one another or to have enmities between different religions and cultures. As we get to know one another better, we not only appreciate how others in different religious communities encounter the divine, but also enhance our understanding of our own religions. In the process, we hope to widen the common ground that we all share in the development of all societies.

Dialogue is clearly important, as it seeks to engage individuals, build relationships and deepen mutual trust and understanding. However, to be effective in the promotion of interreligious and intercultural sentiments, dialogue will have to be accompanied by action. Governments have an important role to play in this regard. Governments can and should initiate processes at the local level to bring together key partners capable of establishing links between religious leaders, so as to emphasize the value

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of working together in harmony for mutual benefit. To do this sensitively and meaningfully, we need to recognize the local realities of society, such as the trust that people have in their Governments to be impartial in their dealings with different ethnic communities.

Singapore is a small island State with a population of approximately 4.84 million. Ethnic Chinese make up approximately 75 per cent of the population, Malays make up about 14 per cent and Indians 9 per cent. The rest of the population consists of Eurasians and other ethnic groups.

Singapore is also a multireligious country. While about 15 per cent of the population has no religious affiliation, the majority of Singaporeans are followers of various faiths, including Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and the Baha'i faith, among others.

Notwithstanding our diversity, race and religious relations in Singapore today are generally stable and strong, with a good level of interreligious tolerance and respect. This is no mean feat and is the result of the concerted efforts of the Singapore Government and its people over almost three decades. For example, in 1990, Singapore's Parliament passed the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, allowing the Government to restrain leaders and members of religious groups or institutions from carrying out any act that could cause feelings of enmity, hatred, ill will or hostility among different religious groups. A Presidential Council on Religious Harmony was also formed under the Act to advise the Government on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore. In 2003, the Declaration of Religious Harmony was issued by the national bodies of all mainstream religious groups in Singapore to affirm the importance of and commitment to religious harmony. The Inter-Religious Harmony Circle comprising religious representatives was subsequently formed to further enhance our efforts in the promotion of interreligious harmony.

More recently, in 2006, an overarching governmental effort to foster unity and resilience among various communities and religious groups was established. Called the Community Engagement Programme, it brought together stakeholders from community organizations, businesses, unions, media, educational institutions and religious organizations to take up the responsibility of building social resilience and communal harmony. A major achievement on this

front was the establishment of the National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony, which brings together apex leaders of all major faith and ethnic organizations to dialogue and exchange views.

We are also seeing more ground-up initiatives in the promotion of interreligious dialogue in Singaporean society. One example is a memorandum of understanding signed by the Young Men's Christian Association and the Singapore Malay Youth Library Association in April 2006 to enhance interaction and understanding between Christian youths and their Malay peers.

Efforts to promote dialogue are only one side of the coin. Singapore's approach to communal harmony also comprises legislative measures against those who stir up and provoke racial or religious intolerance. In this regard, the Singapore Government amended the penal code in 2007 to criminalize acts that promote enmity between different religions or racial groups and are prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony in society. The Singapore Government has also shown that it will not hesitate to mete out what some might consider harsh punishments to individuals or groups who commit acts that promote feelings of ill will and hostility between different races and religions. In 2005, three bloggers were sentenced under the Sedition Act for posting inflammatory racist comments about Malays and Muslims on their blogs. The conviction was necessary in order to send a strong message to all Singaporeans that acts that promote feelings of ill will and hostility among different races and religious communities cannot be allowed and that all offenders will be dealt with accordingly.

Singapore, of all countries, knows that peace and communal harmony are hard won. The lessons of the racial riots of the 1960s remain an indelible part of our history, just as the willingness of our people to embrace the diversity of ethnicities and religions continues to be passed on from generation to generation. This mutual understanding is something that we have come to accept and treasure in Singapore, in order to keep our small multicultural society cohesive and harmonious.

We have also learned that preserving trust and understanding among different religious communities requires a spirit of give and take. In respecting others, every religious group will be protected and assured of fair treatment in all aspects of life. This is an approach

which is pragmatic and responsible and has worked for Singapore, as it allows every section of society to work together as partners for a common cause and to build an equal and harmonious society.

In this regard, my delegation is pleased to support the efforts spearheaded by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to bring about this plenary discussion on a culture of peace. This initiative reaffirms the importance of promoting interreligious dialogue as the way towards peaceful coexistence among nations and peoples. My delegation also notes that the General Assembly has declared 2010 as the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, and we pledge our support for the events that will be held in the course of the Year to further enhance efforts in that context.

Engaging in interreligious and intercultural dialogue has never been more pertinent than in today's increasingly globalized world. Open and sustained dialogue, as well as respect for the freedom of expression and of religious belief, are fundamental to our endeavour to promote a culture of peace. We have seen the emergence of various initiatives and mechanisms within the United Nations towards this end. The task at hand is to ensure the synergy of these efforts so that we can all stand on common ground in promoting the development of human society and building a harmonious world.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of San Marino.

Mr. Bodini (San Marino): I wish to thank the President of the General Assembly for convening this meeting, the Secretary-General for preparing the report on interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace, and His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud for his initiative to request this high-level meeting here in the General Assembly Hall.

The Republic of San Marino has been able to preserve its independence and its citizens' freedom throughout the past 17 centuries only with the strength of peaceful tolerance: tolerance with our neighbours and tolerance among our own people. Tolerance is at the core of all religions. We embrace the statement made yesterday by His Majesty the King of Saudi Arabia:

“Terrorism and crime are the enemies of ... every religion and every civilization. They would not have appeared except for the absence of the principle of tolerance” (A/63/PV.46).

During the last year of the Second World War, when powerful armies were devastating our neighbours' countryside and cities and decimating their civilian population, San Marino was able to shelter and feed more than 100,000 refugees — a number five times larger than our population in those days — without distinction as to their political and religious beliefs.

The Republic of San Marino is very conscious of the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Our Government, during its chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, was at the forefront of debate on this topic. That debate generated a conference on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue in Europe. The conference was attended by the Council member States, leaders belonging to the three major monotheistic religions and experts from civil society.

We are very pleased that this very important meeting is taking place here in the General Assembly Hall. More than ever, our General Assembly must be the engine room for generating bold new ideas in order to enable all of us to respond to old and new challenges of our world, such as climate change, financial meltdown, economic depression, poverty, development, endemic disease and terrorism.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of Azerbaijan.

Mr. Mehdiyev (Azerbaijan): At the outset, allow me to express my Government's gratitude and sincere thanks to His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the initiative to request this high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the culture of peace. This meeting indeed offers a timely opportunity to exchange views and ideas on the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, tolerance, mutual understanding and cooperation.

Located at the geographic crossroads of the West and East, Azerbaijan has embraced various elements of both cultures and civilizations. Indeed, in my country, where various faiths and religious trends have been

propagated throughout our history, relations of tolerance were established and prevailed among different communities.

From the second half of the nineteenth century, the capital of Azerbaijan, Baku, became the petroleum centre of the region and beyond, while the country amassed a mixture of languages, religions and cultural traditions. In 1918, Azerbaijan established the first-ever democratic republic in the East, with a multiparty parliament and a coalition Government. During the years of communist rule in Azerbaijan, which mercilessly fought against religion, remarkable religious centres were destroyed and spiritual values and traditions were subjected to systematic desecration and oppression. Ever since Azerbaijan restored its independence, equality before the law and the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief were effectively guaranteed by the State and many mosques, churches and synagogues were constructed and rehabilitated in the country.

Nowadays, Azerbaijan shares European values and is an inalienable component of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. At the same time, Azerbaijan, as part of the Muslim world, shares the progressive heritage and spiritual values of Islamic culture and civilization. Such an advantage gives us an ample opportunity to contribute to the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue and understanding, encourage ethnic and religious diversity and develop intercommunal links.

Against this background, Azerbaijan has repeatedly expressed its determination to act as a natural bridge consolidating different continents, cultures and civilizations and establishing the necessary prerequisites for the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

Thus, being convinced of the crucial role that media plays in shaping public opinion, in April 2007, Azerbaijan hosted an international conference on the role of media in the development of tolerance and mutual understanding. As an active member of the group of friends of the Alliance of Civilizations, Azerbaijan convened in November 2007, with the support of UNDP, the Council of Europe and the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, a high-level conference in the context of the Youth for Alliance of Civilizations initiative. Another important international gathering took place in

my country this June and was dedicated to the role of women in cross-cultural dialogue.

We look forward to continuing to contribute to peace and mutual understanding through the promotion of a dialogue among civilizations and cultures, including by holding high-profile, action-oriented events that would bring together political leaders, Governments, international organizations, civil society groups, religious communities and the media.

Thus, Azerbaijan will host next month the Council of Europe conference of ministers of culture on intercultural dialogue as a basis for peace and sustainable development in Europe and its neighbouring regions. Furthermore, Baku is being prepared to become the capital of Islamic culture for 2009.

In recent years, unacceptable attacks against Islam in some countries have confirmed the vital necessity of joint efforts and dialogue to counter such defamatory manifestations and misconceptions.

We fully support the recommendations of the Secretary-General on the importance of increasing educational efforts to remove hate messages, distortions, prejudice and negative bias from textbooks and other educational media, and of ensuring the basic knowledge and understanding of the world's main cultures, civilizations and religions.

Against the background of Azerbaijan's principled approach to safeguarding its unity, diversity, cultural heritage and spiritual values, there has been another situation in our immediate neighbourhood based upon the regrettable policy of ethnic and religious incompatibility. Thus, the practical realization of this policy resulted in destructive aggression against Azerbaijan and occupation and ethnic cleansing of its territories. As a consequence, Azerbaijan has suffered, inter alia, from excessive cultural destruction. Numerous historical, cultural, religious monuments and works of art have been destroyed and plundered in the occupied territories of my country. Therefore, the General Assembly's consideration of the agenda item entitled "The situation in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan" plays an important role in attracting the attention of Member States to the illegal practices in the occupied territories and initiating urgent measures to put an end to them.

In conclusion, I express the hope that this meeting will make a valuable contribution to

overcoming stereotypes and misconceptions, to diminishing hostility and to promoting dialogue, understanding and mutual respect among people of different cultural and religious traditions. I am confident that the tangible results of this meeting will be a source of inspiration for all of us in our efforts to find creative solutions to the problems we are facing.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of Mauritania.

Mr. Ould Hadrami (Mauritania) (*spoke in Arabic*): On behalf of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, allow me to express our deep thanks and gratitude to the President of the Assembly for convening this all-important meeting. We also wish to express our appreciation to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, for this valuable initiative, which reflects his sincere commitment to promoting the culture of peace and the efforts that he has been deploying to promote cultural understanding among the peoples of the world. His most recent initiative was the convening, together with King Juan Carlos I of Spain, of the Madrid Interfaith Dialogue Conference, in July 2008.

This high-level debate of the General Assembly acquires special significance in our world, as it comes amid theories of the inevitability of the clash of civilizations and cultures and ideas that seek to deepen the differences among nations and to erode the foundations of peace and coexistence among peoples.

Muslim countries attach special importance to this meeting as an opportunity to project, in this universal forum, the true and noble message of Islam, which is the message of tolerance. Indeed our Prophet says, in our holy tradition, "I was sent with a tolerant faith" and "Allah loves the tolerant faith of truth". It is a universal message that is addressed to mankind and not to a single race, ethnic group or nation. In the Holy Koran, Allah Almighty says "We have sent you to all mankind, to convey to them glad tidings and to warn them of what will come" and "We have only sent you as mercy to the world". Islam honours mankind as human beings and does not discriminate on the basis of colour, sex or ethnicity: "We have honoured the children of Adam". The Messenger of God stood to let a funeral procession go by. Someone said to him "The dead one is not a Muslim". The Messenger of God replied "Is he not a human being?"

This is the nature of Islam, a culture that is open to all cultures and civilizations. It interacts with them. Islam rejects cultural hegemony and respects the right of other religious minorities within its domain to freely practise their rites. It is an open culture, willing to interact with other cultures and civilizations on the basis of clear principles, including the following.

First, there must be mutual respect between all religions without any denigration of the beliefs of others or defamation of their symbols. The Koran says "Do not insult those who do not invoke the message of God so that they will not insult God". We are told to refrain from aggression against others: "Allah does not forbid you from befriending those who did not attack you or expel you from your homes". We must consolidate that which unites peoples and religions: "O people of the scriptures, come to a world that is just between us and you". We are told to observe the rules of dialogue and respect for others: "Allah does not like the public mention of evil except by those who have been wronged". Moreover, we are told to "argue with people of scriptures in decency and with respect". The Koran tells us to "deal justly with all, even if they disagree with us", exhorting us "when you judge between men, judge with justice, and if people aggress against you, remain just because justice is close to piety".

Islam recognizes the heritage of humanity and its progress by establishing and consolidating noble values and high morals. As the Radith says, "I was sent to uphold and complement ethical values". Thus, Muslims believe and revere all prophets and messengers of God who came before them. The Holy Koran says that "the Messenger has believed in what was revealed to him from his Lord, and so have the believers; all believed in Allah and His Angels and His Books and His Messengers, saying, we make no distinction between any of his Messengers".

If dialogue is conducted on these bases, it could lead to deepening the understanding among peoples and promoting human values, consolidating social peace and security, and opening the door to combating injustice and aggression, and laying down the principles of truth, justice, respect for human dignity and for all aspects of our environment, including flora and fauna.

The dialogue among cultures and its contributions to international peace is hampered by several factors,

including unequal opportunities, disparate standards of living, the feeling among many peoples and cultures that they are marginalized or are victims of exclusion and double standards, unjust policies, the negative attitudes of others towards issues of importance to them, preconceived stereotypes and dangerous generalizations based on a few isolated incidents that represent deliberate attempts to obscure the truth while promoting falsehood.

Muslims have received their share of such attitudes and the image of their religion and culture has suffered as a result of such distortions. It is thus time to redress these wrongs and to give them justice. It is time to listen to them, to address their grievances and solve their problems, so that they may contribute to the realization of world peace that they deserve and so that they may actively participate in the dialogue of cultures.

Taking the declaration made at the World Conference on Dialogue held in Madrid and its recommendations as a solid basis for various cultures and civilizations to agree on common strategies to serve humanity, we take special note of the following facts: First, diversity of cultures and civilizations is a sign from God, and it should be a cause for the humanity to progress. Secondly, dialogue is essential for life, as it is important to know others, cooperate and communicate with them, in order to find the truth that contributes to the happiness of mankind. Thirdly, we must respect monotheistic religions, beliefs and symbols and must condemn any attempts to denigrate or insult religious symbols or exploit religion to incite racial discrimination. Finally, all cultures and religions call for peace, respect for others and the acknowledgment that they, too, have a right to peace and freedom.

The international community must assume its responsibilities in combating extremism and terrorism by addressing misguided ideological and political concepts as well as the economic and social imbalances that give rise to such phenomena. We should therefore adopt comprehensive integrated strategies based on an educational and cultural approach that renounces hatred, extremism and terrorism and encourages coexistence and communication with other civilizations.

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania which, throughout its history, has abided by the principles and

values of tolerance and was a link for fruitful contacts and exchanges between different cultures and civilizations, stands ready today to continue that role and to support all efforts being deployed to lay down the basis for a culture of peace, coexistence and stability.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of Malaysia.

Mr. Ali (Malaysia): I wish to express our appreciation to the President and to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia, for the effort taken in elevating to a high-level event this plenary meeting of the General Assembly to consider agenda item 45, "Culture of peace". This effort contributes to our common goal of building a culture of peace, tolerance and understanding, and builds upon previous initiatives undertaken by the United Nations on this matter. Malaysia is fully supportive of efforts at the international level that are designed to generate greater understanding between cultures and civilizations.

Our world continues to be besieged with conflicts among nations and among peoples, despite our world's progress into modernity and democracy. Culture, ethnicity and religion are abused by some to highlight the differences among us, and to transform these differences into divisions, as opposed to celebrating them as the beauty of the diversity among peoples. Yet the conflicts that these differences have spawned in our world today remain political in nature and reflect some of the socio-economic gaps in our globalized world.

Malaysia believes that we need to be mindful of the political dimensions vis-à-vis the divide among societies and nations, including, in particular, conflict situations in different regions of the world and the need to reach final and just solutions. Although there remains disagreement in some quarters, it cannot be ignored that intercultural divides are very much influenced by the global political scene. We need to address these political root causes as increased access and exposure to images and information can be easily used either to perpetuate these divides or to help to close them.

Building a culture of peace is also aided through ensuring that people are free from the socio-economic wants in life such as having access to food, shelter, education and decent work, as well as stability and

control over their own future. In this respect, we need to ensure that the right to development is pursued and made tangible, and that inequality gaps in income and opportunities among countries and within societies are overcome.

Societies in general tend to take self-centred views of themselves, viewing other peoples and cultures from the perspective of their own benchmarks and philosophies while sometimes imposing their values on other societies, thereby creating an atmosphere of acrimony and distrust among peoples. We are now witnessing a dangerous trend in the form of a growing schism between different cultures and religions which, if not addressed properly, could present a serious threat to international peace. As a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multireligious country, Malaysia understands very well the challenges the world would be confronted with if this dangerous trend is not reversed.

We are witnessing, inter alia, a growing rise in the phenomenon of Islamophobia and its legitimization in political circles, in the sphere of public opinion and in society at large. This phenomenon is the result of resurgent activities by political parties and associations established on the basis of racist, xenophobic and perceived ideological superiority. The resulting defamation of religions is a real phenomenon, and we disagree with the notion that the defamation of religion is not an infringement of human rights. The defamation of religion constitutes a derogation of the right of belief, as it is inextricably linked to incitement to racial and religious hatred. The defamation of religion and freedom of opinion and expression are not mutually exclusive or incompatible. It is our view that the issue is not one or the other, but ensuring that respect for both can be balanced in conceptual as well as legal and practical terms. This is one area on which the international community should focus, instead of debating the righteousness of one as opposed to the other.

Initiatives such as, inter alia, the holding of this high-level plenary meeting, the Alliance of Civilizations and the Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace are important aspects of the international commitment to the promotion of intercultural, intercivilizational and interreligious understanding and cooperation. Malaysia supports such initiatives and believes that the positive interaction among peoples of diverse cultures and values will help

to achieve the aim of preserving and promoting global peace and stability, which are prerequisites for the promotion of sustainable economic and social development.

While we have been fostering high-level dialogue for the past two days, we also need to focus our subsequent work on ensuring that this interaction flows to the local and grass-roots levels. We need to translate our ideas and thoughts into practical measures. Member States, the United Nations system and civil society all have important and complementary roles in ensuring that that can become a reality. Partnership with civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector, will greatly enhance our mutual efforts to promote intercultural, intercivilizational and interreligious understanding and represents the determined will of the international community to cooperate for peace.

Over the past few years, many other initiatives have been undertaken to promote intercultural, intercivilizational and interreligious dialogue. These include efforts at the international, regional and national levels — sometimes organized and convened by States, and sometimes by agencies within the United Nations system or by civil society. Those efforts are applauded and welcomed. Malaysia feels that the United Nations is the international body best placed to coordinate such efforts and that it can play a leading role.

As part of our intercultural, intercivilizational and interreligious dialogue, all actors need to ensure that we increase the number of bridge-builders and focus on the values that we share. We need to approach dialogue with mutual respect for all our dimensions, including ethnicity, culture and religion, as well as for various countries and nationalities. Once again, I wish to stress that political viewpoints should not cloud our common values.

We must always bear in mind that all belief systems, in essence, extol the virtues of tolerance and peace; that each and every society must develop a democratic system that suits it, while retaining its essential principles; that labelling creates confusion rather than clarity and in some cases can be considered an insult; and that long-lasting issues that continue to plague humanity can act as a rallying cause for extremism and must be resolved in a fair, just and balanced manner.

Malaysia remains convinced that the culture of peace lies in mutual understanding, respect and tolerance among religions, cultures and peoples. We, as members of this body, must work hand in hand to achieve that goal with a view to the peace and prosperity of our world.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on the representative of Ethiopia.

Mr. Alemu (Ethiopia): First of all, my delegation wishes to congratulate the President of the General Assembly on the convening and the fruitful conduct of this high-level meeting on the culture of peace, which, as many previous speakers have said, is more important than ever in today's troubled world. My delegation would also like to express its sincere appreciation to His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, for having personally taken the initiative to make it possible to convene this high-level dialogue on interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace at a very critical time, when mankind urgently needs to achieve better understanding and greater tolerance.

I also wish to express our profound appreciation and satisfaction regarding the report of the Secretary-General (A/63/262) on the agenda item under consideration. Indeed, the report presents a broad overview of the various major activities carried out pursuant to resolution 62/90 over the past year. I shall briefly reflect on some of them in the light of the great significance attached to this agenda item by the Government of Ethiopia from the perspective of its own national policy.

It is gratifying to note that, as well described in the report of the Secretary-General, quite a number of encouraging activities have been carried out by UNESCO, the Alliance of Civilizations, the United Nations Population Fund, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Department of Public Information and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, all of which play direct roles in implementing the agenda under review, with various focuses and mandates. Thus, the important activities carried out by those major actors in facilitating and promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue and in developing concrete working relationships with cultural and faith-based organizations that play useful roles and make

contributions in that area are truly promising. They inspire member countries to become further engaged in nurturing and enriching this crucial agenda with greater commitment and a shared vision.

That would undoubtedly provide additional impetus and strength to the burgeoning achievements that have been made so far and the many promising activities that are still in the pipeline or at an initial stage, not to mention the promise that it would hold for future activities. In that regard, it may suffice to consider what has been accomplished within the relatively short period of time since the establishment of the Alliance of Civilizations in 2005 under United Nations auspices, following the commendable initiatives taken by the Governments of Spain and Turkey.

It is indeed gratifying to learn that the Alliance — which has the lofty aim of improving understanding and cooperative relationships among States and peoples across cultures and religions, coupled with the imperative of helping to counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism — has made some good progress, which quite rightly began with the engagement of eminent personalities from around the globe. We recognize that the appointment of a United Nations High Commissioner to direct the enormous task and the development of a detailed and action-oriented implementation plan in various appropriate fields were steps taken in the right direction to fulfil the initiative's paramount objectives.

The fast increase in the expansion of political support around the Alliance through the Group of Friends mechanism, whose membership of countries and multilateral groups has doubled from 44 last year to 88 this year, is in itself an example par excellence of the positive progress made in that regard.

Likewise, the successful convening of the first Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations, in January 2008 in Madrid, hosted by the Government of Spain, was truly a remarkable step in the right direction. My country, Ethiopia — one of the very few cradles of human civilization — was honoured to take part in that grand Forum, with two-pronged high-level representation, by the Government and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. We enthusiastically support the outcome of that historic Forum and look forward to the upcoming Second Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations, which the Government of Turkey has

willingly promised to host in April 2009, and which is expected to attract even wider worldwide participation than its predecessor as a high-profile event.

Ethiopia, whose strengths as a nation lie in the diversity of its peoples, is home to more than 80 different ethno-linguistic groups and as such has rightly been described as a mosaic of cultures, beyond being the very cradle of mankind itself. Ethiopia is also known as an ancient common home of the three Abrahamic religions; Judaism, Christianity and Islam, whose followers have lived together in harmony and tolerance for millennia, making the country an outstanding example of religious tolerance and, indeed, cohesion through its unique, age-old blessing of unity in diversity. It is a land where peoples of many religions and creeds live and work together and understand and help one another in ideal harmony. Indeed, it would not be an overstatement to say that is something that has won Ethiopia respect and admiration from far and wide.

As members may know, history has recorded and will always remind us that Ethiopia — or Abyssinia or Al-Habasha — is often described as the haven of the first migration, or hegira. For Muslims, Ethiopia is synonymous with freedom from persecution and emancipation from fear, for this was a land where its Christian king, Negus or Al-Najashi — whose proper name was Ashsama ibn Abjar — was a person renowned for justice, and in whose kingdom human rights were cherished. As recited in various Islamic and Ethiopian literatures, the famous Bilal ibn Rabah, or Bilal al-Habashi, originally a non-Muslim slave from Ethiopia who lived in Mecca during the time of Prophet Muhammad, was known to have been an important and trusted companion of the Prophet. And it was no coincidence that his native land, Ethiopia, was the country chosen by the Prophet when his followers needed protection and freedom from persecution.

That cross-religious understanding and accommodation has endured the test of time and events and lives on to further strengthen and deepen the bonds. Indeed, those are real historic instances of dialogue and cooperation. Their key message, which is still valid in our times, is that we should all recognize the existence of heroes of faith who do not see or treat each other as adversaries, but instead capitalize on the closeness of each other's faiths and seek to build bridges instead of impassable walls based solely on

differences. That certainly applies equally with respect to all other religions and faiths.

For us in Ethiopia, tolerance and respect for different cultures, ethnicities and faiths is fundamental to our way of life. Indeed, we even consider it a question of survival, so as to make sure that the nation will continue to be united, as it has been throughout its long history and so that it will continue to thrive in unity and development, for the benefit of all. Nurturing mutual accommodation, understanding and respect among peoples of different cultures and faiths has remained engrained in our own traditions as a nation. In a way, that is the whole essence of what we have celebrated as the new Ethiopian third millennium over the course of the past year, both at home and abroad, cherishing it along with others worldwide.

The Ethiopian federal constitution is firmly anchored on principles including that of according genuine recognition to and safeguarding the individual identities and rights the country's nationalities and ensuring their full participation and representation. It also enshrines our commitment to the objective of promoting unity in diversity. Thus, accommodating the diverse identities of national groups, the right to self-determination and the establishment of a federal structure that effectively devolves power to the grass roots on the basis of those principles are but some of the major remarkable features of the political system now in place in Ethiopia.

Thanks to the federal constitution, the peoples of Ethiopia have succeeded in further entrenching their age-old tradition and culture of peace and peaceful coexistence as a tolerant society, embracing and accommodating all sorts of differences in terms of cultural identity and religious belief. As a token of that enduring virtue, a national Flag Day was officially celebrated this year for the first time in the country's long history, to pay due tribute to the tricolour flag of the nation. The flag represents an eternal source of our country's strength and of the endurance of its diverse peoples, who have succeeded in surmounting untold challenges for centuries, united as one and reaping the benefits of peace, development, tolerance and mutual cooperation — which is the case all the more so today.

Moreover, that innate mutual respect and tolerance extends to surrounding areas and the world beyond the natural confines of the country, owing to the fact that the principle of peaceful neighbourliness

and coexistence is one of the major pillars of the federal constitution, and the foreign policy of Ethiopia, which remains a hub of peace and cooperation for mutual benefit and for development in our region and beyond.

The promotion of interactive dialogue and understanding among the major world religions and cultures is not a matter of choice or, as His Majesty King Abdullah of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has aptly put it, not a matter of luxury. It is rather a must: something to which we must all attach due significance. We must undertake concerted action and manifest sustained commitment, to realize our hope for a peaceful world, where tolerance, respect and accommodation, rather than rejection and confrontation, prevail and where misunderstandings based on ignorance and fear among peoples no longer exist.

Indeed, the popular Holy Koran verse that was identically recited by Their Majesties the King of Saudi Arabia and the Emir of the State of Kuwait, as well as by other heads of Government or delegation who spoke after them at this gathering yesterday and today, succinctly sums it up. And as its counterpart from the Holy Bible counsels us to treat our brethren in the same way as we would wish to be treated by them, the two great books truly complement each other on this very fundamental point, as much as all other major religions and beliefs around the world would have it in their teachings.

Finally, as a staunch believer in the noble cause of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace, and as a sponsor of the draft resolutions presented for adoption by Assembly to further promote this cause, I would like to reassure the Assembly that Ethiopia remains firmly committed and will continue to actively play its part in the pursuit of this paramount global initiative both at home and elsewhere, near and far, because the enormous task of nurturing the culture of peace is a crucial common stake for us all.

Address by Mr. Gordon Brown, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): The Assembly will now hear an address by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Mr. Gordon Brown, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, was escorted to the rostrum.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I have great pleasure in welcoming His Excellency Mr. Gordon Brown, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and inviting him to address the General Assembly.

Mr. Brown (United Kingdom): I am delighted that so many leaders who have served the world with such distinction and whom I admire for their statesmanship have assembled from every faith and every continent for this very special conference on the culture of peace and the power of dialogue. And I am grateful that this conference is being held under the auspices of the United Nations and in this great Hall where so many declarations and decisions that have changed history have been pronounced.

Let me pay tribute especially to King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, a man of great faith whose leadership has inspired this dialogue. It is in recognition of his work and that of the Secretary-General, whom I also applaud, that President Bush, the King of Jordan, the Emir of Kuwait, Presidents Peres, Zardari, Karzai and Halonen and Prime Minister Erdoğan and many, many more have addressed this forum yesterday and today.

Never has such a global dialogue been so critical. Never has this global leadership working for its success been so strong and so inspirational. And never have the global opportunities that might flow from this and then to conflict, division, misunderstanding and poverty been so profound and so necessary. For if we believe that our future peace and security lie together rather than apart, lie in understanding not in isolation, lie in the differences that we acknowledge and that enrich us and not the differences that divide us, then we must speak to people's values and speak to their beliefs.

More than two thirds of our fellow citizens are followers of the major faiths, so we can be in no doubt about the power of faith to shape our world. And while it is not for politicians to lead that bringing together of faiths — that can ultimately only be done by the leaders of faith communities themselves — we cannot successfully lead nations without it.

History tells us that the greatest of social movements have been built on the strongest of ethical

foundations. Two hundred years ago, was it not men and women of faith and religious conviction who successfully campaigned for the abolition of the slave trade? They said that we could not be one world until slavery was ended. Fifty years ago, was it not men and women of conscience and religious faith who inspired the civil rights movement here in this country by saying that we could not be one world until every single citizen, whatever their colour, their race or background, enjoyed equal rights?

And is it not men and women of conscience and religious conviction who say today, as we said here in this General Assembly only a few weeks ago, that we cannot be one world when 30,000 children die unnecessarily every day from diseases we know how to cure, and that we must together respond to this poverty emergency by redoubling our efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals?

This is the power of faith, to forge the greatest possible coalition for the common good — not one that seeks to impose uniformity of doctrine or culture, but one that is enriched by diversity, united by shared values and empowered by a common commitment to make our world a better place.

Too often throughout history, people have seen the foreigner as at best a stranger and sometimes, at worse, an enemy, and too often cultures and faiths appear to change at national borders as dramatically as fashion and language. But today we know we are not and never can be moral strangers to each other, because we find that through each of our heritages, our traditions and faiths runs a single powerful moral sense — a sense that we all share the pain of others, a sense that we believe in something bigger than ourselves. Christians say, “Do to others as you would have them do to you”. Judaism says, “Love your neighbour as yourself”. Muslims say, “No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself”. Buddhists say, “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful”. Sikhs say, “Treat others as you would be treated yourself”. Hindus say, “The sum of duty is do not unto others which would cause pain if done to you”.

Now call this the best angels of our nature, call it the light in man, call it the moral sense, call it, as the philosopher Adam Smith did, the moral sentiment. Call it conscience of fostering compassion. Call it the global ethic, the irrevocable unconditional norm for all

areas of life, for families, communities, for races, nations and religions: most of us accept that what you do not wish done to yourself, you do not do to others. It is the same sacred ideal at the ethical heart of all true religions — our duty to others, our concern for the outsider, the sense that each of us is our brother’s and sister’s keeper.

So to those who say that religion, and especially that the misunderstanding and intolerance that has often existed between religions, is responsible for many of the problems we face today, I say we will address these problems if we act upon that moral sense that is shared at the heart of all the great faiths of the world.

We have a unique opportunity in this new global age, in what is an interdependent world, to act upon that interdependence and make a partnership by working together for the common good. And what is new in this global age is our enhanced ability to communicate with each other, to speak to each other across continents. It was not so long ago that we would say, “If only people could communicate across borders. If only people could hear what their opponents have to say. If only they could speak with each other and find that they have so much in common, then the world would be different”.

But today most of these barriers, these old barriers to communication, are being removed. We can now communicate with each other across frontiers, almost instantaneously. Through the Internet, through texting and through e-mailing, there are hundreds of thousands of social networks crossing the world; there are millions of people who may not inhabit the same street but now inhabit the same Internet site. It is in the encounter of listening, and being listened to, that we discover that the beliefs we have in common are so much greater than what has in the past driven us apart.

We discover what Britain’s Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, calls the dignity of difference — people, he said, all made in the divine image, who find that they are possessed of a dignity and sanctity that transcends our differences. And we must act upon our interdependence.

Recently, in Abuja, I visited a run-down and dilapidated school, where children were sitting either on the floor without a desk or three to a desk that had been built for one. Their parents told me that a few miles away, a far better school, a far better equipped

school, offered free education. But the great facilities and teachers came at a high price, because they were funded by an extremist group poisoning the children's minds and attracting them to a life of terrorism.

I believe it falls upon us to ensure the right to a decent education, free of extremism, for every child in the world. Think, if the achievement of this generation could be that every child was able to go to school to gain an education to recognize what they had in common with other children, and I believe we could do that, by coming together and spending \$10 billion a year — \$100 for each child.

But let us agree that first, we should do everything to fight extremism wherever it exists, so that people understand the central tenets of their faiths and the rich association those faiths enjoy with each other. And we in Britain will continue to step up our campaign, working with other countries, to separate decent young people from the pressures of divisive and extremist advocates of terrorism.

Secondly, the values of different faiths are already expressed in joint projects and common service. In Britain, we have Muslim Aid, collaborating with the United Methodist Committee in America to respond to the needs of disaster victims in Asia. British Muslims working with American Christians to support Asian neighbours of all faiths and traditions gives us a glimpse of the potential of faith across our world.

As we celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, so we should also see shared values through a shared commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms. I have one other proposal about how shared values can bring us together: 40 years ago, the United States created the Peace Corps for young people from America to help the world and, around the world, many countries, including Britain, have their own Voluntary Service Overseas organizations.

But in this new global age, should we not celebrate the shared moral sense that is common to all cultures, all religions and all faiths by bringing young people together in a global corps, perhaps a global environmental corps, a global community service corps, a global peace corps and a global medical aid corps, bringing young people of all nationalities and faiths together with each other in a global effort that will show the strength that comes from the world's young people acting together?

Thirdly, we should repeat the importance that everyone who has spoken here attaches to peace in the Middle East and the creation of a Palestinian state side by side with an Israeli State that has its security guaranteed. We in Britain, with other countries, will continue to work for that objective, which, I believe, can be achieved by goodwill in the Middle East.

At this unique point in our history, when the world is facing the first financial and resources crises of the new global age, the ability to come together and build shared solutions has never been more important.

Let me send out the strongest message that the road to economic ruin in the past has been following the path of protectionism. The way forward is not countries working in isolation from or against each other, but countries cooperating together. I believe that as world leaders gathered in Washington this weekend, we must and we will see enhanced cooperation by Governments to deal with economic problems that are now hitting every continent in the world. But I also believe that what matters is a clear statement coming from this conference in New York that, far more than the cooperation of Governments, the cooperation of peoples, whatever their faith, in each continent of the world will determine whether we can build a truly global society.

I believe that if, through our continuing dialogue, we can come to recognize our common ground, the common ground on which we stand, whatever our faith traditions, and a common commitment to peace, freedom, prosperity, tolerance and respect — if we can mobilize a global movement around those shared goals, then the achievements can be momentous. Together, we can become the first generation to abolish illiteracy and give every child the chance of education. We can become the first generation to solve the climate change together. We can become the first generation to eradicate tuberculosis, polio, diphtheria, malaria and HIV/AIDS from the face of the Earth.

We can become the first generation to consign extreme poverty to the history books for all time. We can become the first generation to do so by demonstrating by our actions what this conference has been all about today, that the greatest social changes are built from the strongest ethical foundations.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): On behalf of the General Assembly, I wish to thank the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain

and Northern Ireland for the statement he has just made.

Mr. Gordon Brown, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, was escorted from the rostrum.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of El Salvador.

Mr. García González (El Salvador) (*spoke in Spanish*): I would like to express my delegation's appreciation for this important initiative to convene a high-level plenary to examine the culture of peace and dialogue among cultures, civilizations and religions.

We would like to thank His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, for his courageous and timely leadership on this subject, especially against the background of the unprecedented multidimensional crisis that the international community is facing and that forces us to reflect deeply on the consequences and examine possible joint solutions within the framework of renewed multilateralism and in the configuration of a new multipolar world.

El Salvador reaffirms its commitment to continue implementing the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace, which are the strategic and programme base of the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World for the period 2001 to 2010.

Also, we agree with other delegations in acknowledging as a fundamental and inescapable issue that the basic root of all global crises lies in mankind's denial of the universal principle of justice.

The world in which we live is the only one, and therefore we live and prosper as one in harmony and fraternal dialogue among cultures, civilizations and religions, or we all face collective annihilation. Only a complete and orderly reconstruction of the current world economic and political system will bring justice and peace. We must be aware that without justice and peace, the future will be truly bleak. We must therefore prepare ourselves to share and achieve jointly internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals.

In the opening statement, by the President of the General Assembly at this high-level plenary, he rightly pointed out that that multidimensional crisis could, and should, become a joint opportunity to adopt the courageous measures necessary to guarantee new levels of coexistence among people and between ourselves and nature, so as to ensure a better world for this and future generations. He also said that we are obviously lacking the political will to move from mere spoken acknowledgement to the adoption of specific, sustained and coordinated measures at the local and international levels. In that regard, the United Nations has very fittingly set out a complex programme aimed at achieving a better world.

We are convinced of the accuracy of the President's comments and, in particular, of his vision that we are here today to commit ourselves to harnessing our moral strength in the service of the goals of the United Nations which, at the end of the day, are for the benefit of our own peoples. As the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization reminds us, "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed".

We should agree that peace is not just the absence of conflict, but that it also involves a conscious effort of creation and empowerment in the minds of people. Therefore, from my country's perspective, the concept of a culture of peace is closely linked to the active promotion of dialogue and alliance among cultures, civilizations and religions. All cultures, civilizations and religions are equal and therefore have the duty to promote dialogue to support values and principles promoting the culture of peace, including tolerance, respect for others, mutual understanding, respect for cultural diversity, and support for non-violence and the principles that support peaceful coexistence among all.

El Salvador remains committed to the implementation of resolution 62/90 of 17 December 2007 on the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace, and specifically welcomes the declaration of 2010 as the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures. We are convinced that meeting our obligations in the universal promotion and respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms constitute the essential basis for continuing to make progress in the collective commitment to peace.

We reaffirm the right to peace as one of the main pillars of all universal human rights. We acknowledge that the main challenge of the twenty-first century is extending and contextualizing the meaning of collective security. Hence, deep-rooted, consensual, democratic, efficient and effective reform is necessary to generate the mutual trust that will enable us to build peace on a solid and sustainable basis.

In that context, we encourage the Security Council and the Peacebuilding Commission to join in the efforts of the General Assembly to promote a culture of peace and non-violence for the children of the world. We also salute and commend the active participation of civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector, in the promotion of activities aimed at the culture of peace and non-violence, and especially their awareness-raising campaigns on the culture of peace around the world.

Finally, I reiterate the political will of the Government of El Salvador to continue to actively promote the values and principles guiding the effective construction of a culture of peace to the benefit of all of our peoples.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Mr. Khazae (Islamic Republic of Iran): At the outset, let me express my appreciation for the organization and convening of this important meeting. I wish to begin my statement by reciting some verses of the Holy Koran that are relevant to the subject of our deliberations today. First, based on the Koran's teachings, all nations dwelling on Earth share the same origin and, in case of any disagreement or dispute, they should refer to divine rules. As it is said in the Koran,

(*spoke in Arabic*)

“Mankind was one single nation, and Allah sent messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book in truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed”. (*The Holy Koran, II:213*)

(*spoke in English*)

Secondly, there is no distinction and discord among the messengers of God and they all delivered the same message to human beings. As it is said in the Koran,

(*spoke in Arabic*)

“Men of faith, each one of them believeth in Allah, His angels, His books, and His messengers. We make no distinction between one and another of His messengers”. (*The Holy Koran, II:285*)

(*spoke in English*)

Thirdly, all messengers of God are carriers of truth from Allah, the Almighty, to the people, and are their guides towards God. As it is said in the Koran,

(*spoke in Arabic*)

“He is He who sent down to Thee, in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it; and He sent down the Torah and the Gospel”. (*The Holy Koran, III:3*)

(*spoke in English*)

As a result of Islamic teachings and our rich culture, the Iranian people, a nation deeply rooted in the history of mankind and one of the cornerstones of civilization, have always respected other religions, nations and cultures. Although about 95 per cent of the Iranian population is Muslim, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran has bestowed upon the religious minorities in my country equal rights, and even in some instances a privileged position, and the right to freely practise their religions.

At present, Iranian religious minorities are enjoying the equal right to representation in our Parliament, regardless of the small size of their population. The practical commitment of the Government and people of Iran to the teachings of Islam and the provisions of the Constitution has resulted in shaping constructive coexistence among Muslims, Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians. As a result, all religious minorities in Iran consider themselves to be integral parts of the Iranian nation and are playing a constructive role in their society and enjoying the full freedom to practise their religions in more than 500 places of worship, including churches, synagogues and temples.

Inspired by the noble Islamic principles of respect for human diversity, the recognition of diverse sources of knowledge, the promotion of dialogue and mutual understanding, genuine mutual respect in human interchanges and the encouragement of courteous and civilized discourse based on reason and

logic, the Islamic Republic of Iran has greatly contributed to the promotion of dialogue at the international level.

My country is well recognized for its widely supported initiatives in favour of dialogue among civilizations, religions and cultures, and solidarity for peace, the latter of which was proposed by the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran last year. Moreover, as an important country in our region and in the Islamic world in general, and as representatives of the Shiite school of thought, we have been among the pioneers of inter- and intrafaith dialogue and have participated in many such events to date. We consider such dialogue to be an opportunity and the proper approach to better articulating different ideas, visions and aspirations of and for human society and to taking advantage of the collective wisdom of humankind and avoiding conflict and violence.

We believe that, in order to provide our societies with more humane, safe and prosperous living opportunities, we must work together to bring about a greater level of understanding and respect among the believers of divine religions. In our collective endeavour, we should not lose sight of the principles of our divine religions calling on us to exercise tolerance, respect and compassion for those who belong to religions other than ours. Islam, like other divine religions, calls for tolerance and mutual respect among the various nations and groups in order to preserve cohesiveness and solidarity in human society. This call is for the enrichment of human dignity, which is deeply rooted in Islam and other divine religions, as well as in many cultures and civilizations.

Since we are all in the same boat, it is necessary that conditions be provided for every passenger to collaborate in enhancing cooperation to nurture peace and harmony among different religions, cultures and civilizations. Therefore, dialogue among the followers of the divine religions could bear the fruits of peace and friendship if it is undertaken in accordance with the principles of equality and dignity of all parties and in good faith. In other words, all initiatives with a view to improving cooperation should encourage us to work to promote the essence and character of all religions — human dignity and integrity.

We are of the view that this noble objective can serve as a shining light in the critical situation the world finds itself in today. In our highly interconnected

world, if global challenges are to be confronted; if hegemony, domination, aggression and bitter conflicts are to be avoided; and if the common interests of all nations are to be secured, peaceful coexistence guaranteed, and lasting international peace, security, stability and harmony promoted, cooperation is not an option but a necessity.

To ensure a satisfactory level of continued cooperation, there is an urgent need to utilize the potential on the ground. In this regard, we should attach great importance to dialogue as an essential, efficient and cost-effective way to bridge the gaps resulting from misunderstanding and misinterpretation and to promote mutual confidence and respect.

All divine religions call for the peace, welfare and salvation of all people without any distinction as to race, colour, sex, language, religion and political or other affiliation. However, throughout world history, there have been examples of insults to or other abuse of religious values that, in some instances, have had long-standing detrimental effects on countries and peoples subjected to such treatment. In today's world, certain countries and regions are victims of unjust, inequitable, partial and monopolized propaganda that continuously distorts the facts and realities relating to them.

We express our deep concern that Islam and Muslims are frequently and wrongly associated with unjust and unfair accusations, such as human rights violations and terrorism. Similarly, the systematic negative stereotyping of Islam and other divine religions and the ridicule of religious personalities who are respected and beloved by believers of those religions are sources of great concern for the world community, and especially for the Islamic nations. We regret that these measures have been undertaken under such pretexts as the war on terror or the exercise of one's right to the freedom of expression.

In this context, I would like to stress the essential need for all people to live up to the responsibilities associated with the rights they enjoy, particularly the right to freedom of expression. In line with our efforts to promote inter- and intrareligious dialogue, we should prevent any attempt to abuse religious, cultural and racial differences. There is no doubt that such abuses sow the seeds of division, animosity and confrontation among our nations. It is clear that any resort to such tactics or manoeuvres in our current

interfaith dialogue would lead to division among us and result in our failure to reach our desired goals.

Unfortunately, a representative of a regime which in its short history has been marked by crimes of aggression, occupation, assassination, State terrorism and torture against the Palestinian people under the pretext of a false interpretation of a certain religion has tried to abuse this meeting for his regime's narrow political purposes. Undoubtedly, the participation of such a regime here not only fails to benefit our common purpose, but also, as proved in this very Hall yesterday, allows it to try to disrupt the current process and divert our attention from our mandate.

In conclusion, my delegation would like to express its hope that, by promoting interfaith dialogue and respect for cultural values and civilizational specificities as a means of celebrating religions and the achievements of our civilizations as the common heritage of humankind, the international community will be able to provide the appropriate conditions for ensuring the progress and well-being of humankind and to build an equitable new international order founded on inclusion, participation, mutual understanding and tolerance among peoples and nations.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of the Republic of Korea.

Mr. Park In-kook (Republic of Korea): We live in an increasingly complex world where globalization and collective identities are intertwined with culture, tradition, and religion. Over time, these elements are constantly being pulled closer together in both positive and negative ways.

In the era of the Internet, global travel and instant satellite transmissions, people are encountering increasingly unfamiliar surroundings and new ideas. Sometimes, those differences take the form of unexpected skin colours, cultures, traditions and religions, which can produce anxiety about the unknown. It is paradoxical that the era of globalization, which is supposed to enhance mutual understanding and acceptance, is instead increasing intolerance and discrimination.

The history of humankind is not defined by the continuation of wars and conflict. The centrepiece of human history is the culture of peace and coexistence among members of society, as well as among

civilizations, cultures and religions. Thus, we have to reject any entrenched predispositions towards endless confrontation, struggle and an inevitable clash of civilizations. Instead, we should further reaffirm and cultivate the culture of peace, tolerance and acceptance throughout society, which has been the engine of human history and prosperity.

The Republic of Korea has fully supported international efforts to advance the culture of peace among nations and various actors. Those efforts include addressing widening rifts between societies, reaffirming a paradigm of mutual respect among peoples of different cultural and religious traditions and helping to mobilize concerted action to that end. In that regard, we highly appreciated the leadership of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in guiding Member States with his strong sponsorship of and support for important initiatives, including the Alliance of Civilizations and the interfaith dialogue. As one of the members of the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations, the Republic of Korea endorses its innovative and results-oriented approaches accompanied by substantial programmes.

Religion is an increasingly important dimension of many societies and a significant source of values for individuals. As such, religion should be a source of peace. However, the exploitation or misuse of religion by ideologues has led to the misguided perception that religion itself is a root cause of intercultural conflict. In fact, no religion promotes violence, but all promote the ideals of compassion, respect for the dignity of life and the peace of humankind.

Asia has enjoyed a long tradition of harmony, inclusiveness and peaceful coexistence. Similarly, peaceful coexistence, beneficial trade and reciprocal learning have been hallmarks of the relationship between Christianity, Islam and Judaism, as many leaders of the international community have emphasized in our meetings yesterday and today. That tradition of peaceful coexistence should be restored in order to make the world safer. In that regard, we support the Madrid Declaration issued by the World Conference on Dialogue and look forward to progress on the recommendations of the Declaration as well as strong leadership by religious figures.

The Republic of Korea would like to share some of its views drawn from our own experience. First, my country has moved beyond colonization, civil war and

authoritarian rule to achieve full-fledged democracy. From that experience, we have learned that democratic governance — which includes the essential elements of the promotion of human rights and the rule of law and a commitment to pluralism — leads to an enhanced level of tolerance and respect for peoples and civilizations different from our own.

Secondly, adaptation to the changing environment and addressing existing and potential conflicts are key to building a harmonious society. In that process we have learned a variety of hard-won lessons that proved that the core concept of a harmonious society is diversity. We should not resist diversity or be afraid of it. Diversity is not a source of tension, but a source of dynamism and creativity. By promoting diversity, accepting differences and nourishing interactions, society becomes richer in culture and more open and flexible to change.

Korean society is also rapidly becoming multicultural, with a growing immigrant population. As part of efforts to fully embrace immigrants, foster a culture of acceptance and promote diversity, we have introduced various initiatives, including multicultural festivals, the distribution of a cultural guidebook for migrant workers and the establishment of a multicultural family support centre.

Thirdly, the concept of tolerance should be replaced by the concept of inclusiveness. Tolerance implies that those who should be tolerated are still among the minority or exist as outsiders. Instead, those with different religious or cultural backgrounds should be accepted as full members of any society. In my country, Christianity, which was introduced only within the past few generations, has now become one of the major religions. It has now taken deep root in the values and ordinary lives of people on the street.

A more recent phenomenon is the increasing number of followers of Islam. A Korea-Arab Society has been established and new mosques are being built. Islamic culture is contributing to the diversity and harmony of our society. Regardless of an individual's faith or cultural background, we see that lasting harmony and peace can be achieved when people are included as insiders in society.

My last point pertains to the global and regional dimension of intercultural and interfaith dialogue and cooperation. In order to address certain pressing issues, such as relations between Muslim and Western

societies, a focused approach on the Mediterranean region could be effective. Similar regionally focused approaches should be further expanded, taking into account the regional dimensions of different regions, such as South Asia, East Asia and Latin America. Such regionally focused dialogue and cooperation should be seen as part of the comprehensive global scheme.

We hope that the scope of our efforts to consolidate a culture of peace will embrace all cultures and religions, thereby spreading the values of coexistence and mutual prosperity across a wide segment of humankind. In the long run, efforts should be truly global; and efforts at intercultural and interfaith dialogue and interaction should be pursued in every corner of the world.

In conclusion, we must never lose sight of the fact that the history of humankind is based on peaceful coexistence and mutual prosperity. The Republic of Korea will continue to devote itself to that end.

Ms. Jahan (Bangladesh): Let me begin by thanking the President of the General Assembly for organizing this high-level meeting on the culture of peace. I would also like to convey our deep appreciation to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, for his instrumental role and personal initiative in holding this event.

We are witnessing a growing misunderstanding among faiths, religions and cultures around the world today that not only threatens interfaith tolerance and mutual respect but also the very prospects for peaceful coexistence. This meeting therefore provides a timely and excellent opportunity to share our thoughts and further consolidate the outcome of the Madrid World Conference on Dialogue. We are confident that this initiative will complement the purposes and activities of the United Nations in the related fields.

We are living in difficult times. The proliferation of extremism and racism has assumed disquieting dimensions. Mistrust of and prejudice towards the "other" continue to persist. New manifestations of intolerance towards vulnerable groups, ethnic and religious minorities, immigrants, refugees and migrant workers are on the rise. The world is witnessing an ominous trend of derision aimed at religious symbols and beliefs and the misuse of religion in acts of terrorism, violence and coercion. Defamation of religions, religious stereotyping and incitement to

religious hatred are disrupting social harmony and triggering violations of human rights.

The challenge before us today is to transform the wealth and diversity of civilizations, cultures, religions, traditions and customs into a unifying force rather than a cause for division. We ought to take lessons from the setbacks of previous intercultural and interreligious dialogues that focused on the differences among the faiths, religions and cultures. They erroneously attempted to fuse them together, touching upon deeply entrenched values and sparking conflict.

We believe that all faiths and religions convey the same message of peace, justice and human solidarity. Our approach should be to work on these common denominators that unite us and build upon this premise of commonality. Followers of different faiths, religions and beliefs will have to sit together in fellowship, since in such frank encounters superficial and nominal differences quickly fade away. We believe that dialogue among civilizations, cultures and religions holds the best potential for promoting mutual understanding and the creation of a peaceful world order.

We must encourage people-to-people contacts to bring down barriers and bridge gaps and differences. In this context, my delegation associates itself with the Madrid Declaration of the World Conference on Dialogue. The Declaration will, we believe, lend a fresh impetus to the global campaign for intercultural and interreligious dialogue. We deeply value and recognize the contribution of the World Conference on Dialogue to the international community's series of initiatives seeking to inculcate a culture of peace, tolerance, understanding and respect for human rights among various faiths, cultures and civilizations through dialogue.

We therefore strongly support and encourage the Muslim World League in its endeavour to realize these lofty and urgent objectives. In fact, Bangladesh welcomes all international and regional initiatives aimed at promoting cross-cultural and interfaith harmony, which are mutually reinforcing. Given the multiplicity of such initiatives, we would like the United Nations to take a comprehensive approach to streamlining them, as they will find resonance in strength and oneness in objective.

The culture of peace is a set of values, attitudes, modes of behaviour and ways of life that rejects

violence and prevents conflicts through dialogue among individuals, groups and nations. We believe that a world order that is informed by a culture of peace is conducive to the attainment of our development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals. We see great value in the principles of tolerance, respect for diversity, democracy, and understanding. These ideals were endorsed by Member States in the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace in 1999. Bangladesh was privileged to steer that process.

As we enter the eighth year of the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, it is perhaps the time for reflection, new thinking and making an assessment of where we stand in terms of our commitment. We must set targets to ascertain progress towards creating peaceful societies, and we must strive towards that end.

We wish to express our gratitude to all stakeholders who are contributing to the promotion of a culture of peace. We also highly appreciate the ongoing work of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the relevant fields and that of other involved organizations, both within and outside the United Nations system. We are particularly thankful to non-governmental organizations and civil society. In this pursuit, academics and the media also have an important role to play. We also need to involve youth in the process.

Bangladesh enjoys a commendable track record of religious freedom, harmony and tolerance. Our commitment and contribution to United Nations peacekeeping remain unrelenting. As a member of the Peacebuilding Commission, we are actively engaged with peacebuilding responsibilities in strife-torn parts of the world. We believe a culture of peace holds the key to sustainable peace in post-conflict societies.

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce, on behalf of a large number of delegations, the draft resolution on the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, 2001-2010, contained in the document A/63/L.23. Thus far, 114 Member States have joined us in sponsoring this draft resolution. We earnestly hope that, as in the past, the draft will again enjoy the consensus of the United Nations membership. This year, the draft resolution contains two new elements.

Language is one of the most powerful instruments for preserving and developing human

heritage and identity. We believe that the promotion of mother tongues serves not only to encourage linguistic diversity and multilingual education, but also to develop better awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions throughout the world. This in turn inspires understanding, tolerance and cross-cultural dialogue and contributes to fostering a culture of peace. Out of this conviction, we have incorporated a new preambular paragraph, the fifteenth such paragraph, which recalls the proclamation by UNESCO of 21 February as the International Mother Language Day.

Bangladesh is a traditional sponsor of the resolutions on interfaith dialogue and cooperation for peace. We are also a member of the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations. We acknowledge their valuable efforts towards the promotion of a culture of peace and dialogue at all levels. The other new preambular paragraph, the sixteenth preambular paragraph, appreciates the ongoing efforts of the Alliance of Civilizations and the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace in promoting a culture of peace.

In conclusion, please allow me to reiterate our strong support for the abovementioned, much-needed initiatives that aim at promoting tolerance, peaceful coexistence and exchange among the world's nations and civilizations. Even if the challenges ahead are considerable, we believe that interfaith dialogue can be a most effective method for bridging gaps and solving problems arising from miscommunication, misrepresentation and defamation. What we need is a dialogue that delivers, as the Secretary-General underscored in this very same Hall yesterday. If we all join such projects and seriously commit ourselves to our shared responsibilities, we will hopefully be able to ascertain a more harmonious world for future generations.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of Ukraine.

Mr. Sergeyev (Ukraine) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, allow me to express my gratitude to the States that initiated the inclusion of the item on the culture of peace on the agenda of the General Assembly. What could be more noble than attempts that "are directed towards respect for life, for human beings and their rights, the rejection of violence in all its forms" (A/52/191, annex)? This is exactly what the authors

drew our attention to 10 years ago in the documents on the culture of peace.

We, the Members of the United Nations, are the bearers of different cultures. We belong to different religious denominations, but what unites us is the fact that, within our religions, the human being is interpreted as a creation of God. Why does it happen in history, and why is it happening currently, that the life of this creature of God is destroyed in wars and inter-ethnic conflict? Why are the rights of this creature of God superseded by the political or economic ambitions of certain individuals, groups or political parties?

Mr. Tanin (Afghanistan), Vice-President, took the Chair.

It is certain that, when the life or rights of the human being are attacked by another human or group of individuals who are the same creatures of God, these actions are guided not by the values of the grace of God, but by evil. How can one resist the evil that, in varying forms, poses challenges to humanity? The answer is partly to be found in the debates on the culture of peace being held within the framework of the sixty-third session of the General Assembly. This interreligious and inter-ethnic dialogue must serve to foster tolerance, mutual understanding and solidarity.

At the heart of all United Nations programmes, the Millennium Development Goals in particular, must be a simple human being, the creation of God. Otherwise, noble plans and intentions will be substituted by perfectly worded yet soulless documents. The human being must be the first priority of all our undertakings.

I consciously draw attention to this point because I represent a country that underwent a period of terrible existence within the Soviet bloc, where the life of a human being was among the lowest priorities. Indeed, it was not a priority at all. The example of the Holodomor, our national tragedy of artificially created famine, which over the course of 18 months claimed some 6 to 10 million lives, is eloquent testimony to the utter neglect for the life of the human being in order to achieve political ambitions.

I often cite the following example, because it clearly illustrates the inhuman cruelty of the principal perpetrator of the Holodomor, Stalin, the Soviet dictator. This is how Winston Churchill described his

conversation with Stalin regarding the agricultural policies of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which claimed millions of lives. Sir Winston Churchill asked Stalin: "Have the stresses of war been as bad to you as carrying through the policy of the collective farm?" Stalin answered, "Oh, no. The collective farm policy was a terrible struggle ... 10 millions ... It was fearful ... It was absolutely necessary". That is how, in the twentieth century, without war or revolution, not only a single life, but millions of creatures of God were destroyed. The justification for this act was that it was absolutely necessary.

If such cynical destruction of human beings and disdain for their right to live are not to reoccur, we need to tell the truth with respect to such crimes against humanity. Today, we should be grateful to those who do strive for development and the promotion of the culture of peace. We commend the particular attention that they give to specific measures at the global, regional and subregional levels.

We can only hope that such powerful activity will give us positive and tangible outcomes that will serve to bring about the rapprochement of cultures, to build peace and to eradicate hatred among peoples.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of Viet Nam.

Mr. Le Luong Minh (Viet Nam): On behalf of the delegation of Viet Nam, I wish to thank the President of the General Assembly for convening the second high-level dialogue on interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace. I would also like to thank the Secretary-General for his report (A/63/262) on the activities carried out by key United Nations entities in implementation of resolution 62/90.

My delegation commends the positive measures undertaken over the past years within the framework of the United Nations in promoting the culture of peace in general, and in facilitating interreligious and intercultural dialogue in many parts of the world as a means to achieve this goal, in particular.

Viet Nam supports the approach pursued by United Nations bodies and mechanisms, in particular UNESCO, the United Nations Population Fund, the Department of Public Information, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs,

which advocates long-term measures focusing on, inter alia, further educating younger generations in the veneration of cultural and religious diversity.

As we discuss interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace, we must be reminded that, while peace is the premise for the solution of problems — such as hunger, malnutrition, poverty, and racial and religious discrimination — affecting the lives of hundreds of millions of people in many countries and societies and a whole array of global issues facing humankind, such as climate change, environmental degradation and HIV/AIDS, peace cannot be sustained without solving these burning problems.

Interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation thus can be promoted only if they are based on the shared desire to contribute to strengthening the organic relationship between peace and development and the solution of problems affecting people of all faiths.

We are deeply convinced that UNESCO and other United Nations bodies, with their pools of wisdom and expertise, should play the leading role in coordinating Member States' actions in promoting interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation.

With a population of nearly 90 million, Viet Nam is home to 54 ethnic groups, each endowed with its own unique culture. In Viet Nam, apart from the world's major religions, such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam, indigenous religions like Cao-daism and Hoa-haoism have approximately two million followers each. The many-thousand-year-long history of the Vietnamese nation has been one of both constant interreligious and intercultural diversity and unity. The various faiths have not only coexisted well but have also strengthened each other, as required by the historical contexts of our struggles for survival against alien forces and harsh natural conditions.

In the most difficult times, the Vietnamese people have never failed to foster interreligious and intercultural understanding, cooperation and harmony for the preservation of national independence, sovereignty and peace. Interreligious and intercultural hostilities are foreign to our tradition.

Over the past years, our country has adopted a series of laws and policies that aim at protecting the

nation's diverse cultural values and guaranteeing the people's freedom of religion and belief. Education syllabuses have been developed in eight minority languages, a special television channel has been opened to broadcast in 10 minority languages, and thousands of programmes have been aired by the national radio in 13 minority languages. Great endeavours have been undertaken to help create scripts for many ethnic groups who for ages only had spoken languages.

The Vietnamese constitution provides for freedom of religion and for equality before the law among all religions. Most recently, the United Nations Vesak Day was observed in Viet Nam, with some 5,000 Buddhists participating, to uphold the philosophy of peace, harmony, compassion, non-violence, tolerance and non-self. The unprecedented candle-lighting event, involving 20,000 people from all religious and non-religious backgrounds at the closing ceremony of the event, reaffirmed the earnest aspiration of our people for a world of peace and harmony.

As I said earlier, interreligious and intercultural hostilities are foreign to the tradition of the Vietnamese nation. It is not unheard of for there to be attempts by certain individuals, acting on selfish political interests while disguising themselves in the cloak of religion, to carry out activities detrimental to the very fundamental foundations of a culture of peace. The culture of peace constitutes public order and the guarantor of equality, in both rights and obligations, for all religions before the law, as well as the equality of all citizens before the law in both rights and obligations.

In order to promote interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace, it is the duty of all Member States to ensure that such attempts to abuse the religious freedom we all cherish and to sabotage our shared peace is foreign to our cultures.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of Chile.

Mr. Muñoz (Chile) (*spoke in Spanish*): I should first like to welcome this valuable initiative by Saudi Arabia, which provides an opportunity for the General Assembly to consider the current state of the interfaith dialogue on the basis of the Madrid Declaration adopted in July.

This debate is taking place a few weeks before we commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is the common standard of achievement for all peoples and nations. Article 18 of the Declaration establishes that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. That right includes freedom to change religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in a teaching, practice, worship and observance. Another provision of the Declaration, namely, article 19, recognizes that "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression". Those are complementary provisions that are at the centre of the current debate, as are the equivalent provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

As noted by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief in referring to the relevant provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, limitations to the right to freedom of expression and opinion are designed to protect individuals against direct violations of their rights, and not to protect entities or belief systems.

We are pleased that the Madrid Declaration recognizes respect for human dignity and the promotion of human rights as a principle, as well among the bases for building good relations among all peoples.

We believe that the process launched in Madrid complements other initiatives introduced under the auspices of the United Nations, such as the Alliance of Civilizations and the process of the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace. My country, Chile, is proud to participate in both initiatives.

The role played by religion in the human rights discourse has acquired new relevance in recent years. My delegation believes that that role is derived from the recognition that human rights belong to the individual, and not to abstract values or institutions. That recognition is the foundation of the doctrine of universal human rights.

We are concerned about the approach that values religion and the objects of worship above individual rights. In the event of a conflict, that may mean that the latter are subordinated to the former for the sake of respect for a particular religion. A case in point is what is called defamation of religions. We believe in that approach, but it too could undermine the liberating character claimed by every religion, and may also be in

opposition to human rights. As the Human Rights Committee established pursuant to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights indicated in its General Comment No. 10, restrictions on the exercise of human rights “may not put in jeopardy the right itself”. Restricting the freedom of expression cannot be the automatic reaction of authorities to isolated events affecting a particular religion, however regrettable or condemnable those events may be. What is ultimately needed is more freedom of expression and more tolerance, and not less freedom of expression.

We hope that initiatives such as today’s will serve to build bridges and provide solutions to intercultural tensions — solutions that, in this anniversary year, should deepen our commitment to the cause of universal human rights.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of Italy.

Mr. Terzi di Sant’Agata (Italy): Allow me to express the appreciation of my Government for the convening of this high-level meeting, and to thank the King of Saudi Arabia, His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, for undertaking this initiative.

Italy endorses the statement made yesterday by the special envoy of the President of France on behalf of the European Union, to which I will add a few comments.

For a country like Italy, located at the centre of the Mediterranean, dialogue with different cultures, civilizations and religions is an essential element of its identity, which is rooted in the long history it shares with the States and peoples of Europe and with those on the southern shores of the Mediterranean.

We understand the importance of interreligious dialogue and the vital contribution that religions and religious leaders can make to achieving United Nations goals, such as in the areas of peacekeeping and peacebuilding, protecting human rights and promoting social and economic development.

We should begin by reaffirming the independence of religions and dialogue among them from any Government interference. United Nations Member States should not influence the contents of that dialogue, but they can certainly promote and facilitate it. We have to broaden the scope of our discussions from interreligious dialogue to a wider, more complex intercultural dialogue, including an exchange between

different religions, creeds and philosophical, ethical and humanist traditions. The objective must be to enhance mutual understanding and to welcome the natural existence of diversity. Building a system of tolerance and respect for others that rejects any violent abuse of power paves the way towards the culture of peace, which is the subject of our debate in the General Assembly.

The debate yesterday and today, in which so many heads of State or Government took part, is eloquent proof of the great potential of interreligious and intercultural dialogue in contributing to peace and to the settlement of even the most complex political disputes.

Through our different faiths and deepest philosophical convictions, we must strive to recognize our human affinities and translate them into a message of peace. This is what I took personally from the words pronounced yesterday by His Majesty the King of Saudi Arabia and by the President of the State of Israel, His Excellency Shimon Peres: the practical application of a culture of peace. As President Peres said, “when nuclear weapons, long-range missiles, indiscriminate terror and fanatical incitement determine the agenda, all of us have to change that agenda” (A/63/PV.46).

The tangible and effective openness to dialogue and exchange that we all perceived yesterday and today does not only convey a message of hope; it also constitutes a prerequisite for making this change of agenda possible and attaining a fair and lasting peace in the Middle East, with the vital contribution of all sides: parties to the conflict, regional States and the international community as a whole.

Today, the path to reaching a solution to this conflict is clearer. As His Majesty King Abdullah bin Al Hussein of Jordan rightly stated yesterday, “it is a political conflict and it demands a just, negotiated solution that brings statehood and freedom for Palestinians and security and more regional acceptance for Israel” (A/63/PV.46).

Italy, a founding member of the European Union, has always supported the significant initiatives on dialogue between cultures and religions that have originated within the United Nations. We are convinced supporters of the Alliance of Civilizations, which, as the Secretary-General mentioned, is gradually strengthening its effectiveness. Italy is an active member of the Group of Friends of the Alliance.

Similarly, we look forward to joining the consensus at the end of this meeting to adopt the draft resolution (A/63/L.24/Rev.1), on intercultural and interreligious dialogue promoted by the Governments of Pakistan and the Philippines. I would like to thank them for this initiative.

It is important, however, to underline that any real dialogue between cultures and religions must be underpinned by the recognition of the universality of human rights, including the freedom of religion, as enshrined in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in articles 18 and 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 18 of the Covenant states clearly that freedom of religion not only means freedom to adopt and profess a belief but also the freedom to worship, individually or in groups, both publicly and privately.

The Republic of Italy, having experienced the atrocities of the Second World War, was founded on the recognition of those principles and values. It is by virtue of that foundation that we cannot turn a blind eye to events that touch the deepest chords of peaceful coexistence. The Italian Parliament thus recently approved guidelines that encourage the Government to remain steadfast in the fight against religion-based persecution and discrimination throughout the world.

Religious freedom is under threat in many parts of the world today. The United Nations must therefore focus its efforts and action on the protection and integrity of this fundamental right. One of the greatest threats to religious freedom is intolerance. We strongly support the annual initiative of submitting to the General Assembly a draft resolution on that matter and we are encouraged by the fact that it has always been approved by consensus.

I would like to highlight, as the Secretary-General and other speakers have also done, the fundamental role of youth and young people in dialogue between cultures. The success of any dialogue necessarily and especially depends also on young people. It is that belief that led my Government to set up a youth forum for religious and cultural dialogue with the purpose of encouraging young people to be leaders in supporting policies of tolerance among the various religions and cultural traditions.

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

Mr. Neritani (Albania): It is my honour and privilege to address this high-level meeting of this international body of dialogue and negotiation — a forum in which every day world affairs are taken into consideration with the aim of making the world a better place for all of humankind. It is a particular privilege to represent my country and to join other speakers in addressing this very sensitive and highly important matter, which directly affects the chances for world peace.

We join other previous speakers in expressing our deep appreciation to His Majesty The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia, for his initiative to hold this high-level meeting; to the Mr. President of the General Assembly, and to the Secretary-General, as well as to all the dignitaries who have given their support to the successful accomplishment of this meeting.

Albania is a small country, but it has something great to offer to the world: its own example of the pivotal role that cultural tolerance and understanding can play in society. Throughout their history, Albanians have always proudly demonstrated acceptance of the other and respect for his or her beliefs, building thus a sanctuary of harmonious coexistence between faiths. This remarkable attitude of the Albanian people has been visible not only towards each other, but also towards those who, in difficult times of persecution, have found shelter in the traditional home of acceptance and understanding that is Albania. I refer here to the unprecedented example of those Albanian families, Muslim and Christian alike, who risked their own lives during the Second World War to shelter and protect hundreds of Jewish families from the horrors of the Holocaust. Even recently, during the 1999 Kosovo war, Albania opened its doors and hearts to over half a million Kosovar refugees who had fled the campaign of ethnic cleansing waged by Milosevic's military and paramilitary troops.

Religion rests in the core of every civilization and as such affects the lives, attitudes, traditions and behaviours of millions throughout the world. Therefore, respect for the religion and beliefs of others becomes a quintessential element in building and bridging new perspectives of peace. Unfortunately, the contrary is also true. Religion is very often misused by extremists to fuel dangerous fanatical ideologies or even nationalistic agendas that lead to confrontation and war. The recent history of our Balkan peninsula

demonstrates this very clearly. For that reason, building upon our own history, social texture and geography, Albania as a country at the crossroads between East and West has made interfaith dialogue and understanding a priority for development and social stability.

Albania is at the forefront of supporting every initiative at the regional and international levels which aims to build understanding and trust among peoples of different faiths and cultures. As an active member of the Alliance of Civilizations, we are currently determined to foster communication and interaction among the Alliance's Group of Friends and to strengthen confidence in this initiative. Albania shares the belief of the partner countries in the Group of Friends that the activity of the Alliance should serve as a road map with the potential, through its relevant approaches and concrete projects, to bridge the artificially created divisions between West and East and North and South, and among different cultures and religions in contemporary societies.

Our national strategy on intercultural dialogue reflects a centuries-old tradition of complete harmony and understanding among the country's three major confessions. It fully complies with the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the documents of the Alliance of Civilizations and the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

I have the privilege of communicating to this Assembly Albania's recent initiative to convene the Forum of Interconfessional Dialogue in South-East Europe in January 2009, under the direct patronage of our Prime Minister Berisha, as a follow-up to a previous regional conference held in Tirana in 2004 in cooperation with UNESCO. We have high expectations for the Forum. In view of the new threats and challenges stemming from conflicts, stereotypes and interconfessional prejudices, Albania can render its modest contribution to conflict resolution by sharing the successful model of Albanian society.

As this high-level meeting has demonstrated over these two days, it is possible to strengthen our interfaith and intercultural dialogue on a global level. We hope that we will be able to keep this momentum, and Albania pledges its full contribution in this direction.

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

Mr. Grauls (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): Belgium endorses the statement made by Mr. Alain Juppé on behalf of the European Union. The initiative of His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, is an important contribution to promoting peace and dialogue among religions, beliefs and cultures.

Belgium is convinced that it is particularly by pursuing dialogue that we can fight misunderstanding and prejudice. Our country is a melting pot of cultures, religions and beliefs. We therefore see on a daily basis the wealth that this diversity brings us. But this diversity also poses challenges, and it is, inter alia, through dialogue among all the components of society that Belgium is able to overcome them.

In this context, the respect for freedom of religion and belief is fundamental. To be sure, dialogue among cultures and religions is possible only if the freedom of each person to choose what he or she wants to believe or not believe is accepted. All of the various dimensions of this basic freedom — that is, the freedom to have a religion or a belief, to not have one, or to change one's religion or belief — are therefore of equal importance.

To be effective, this dialogue must be inclusive. All of the religions and beliefs must be involved in the dialogue, without hierarchy or discrimination. This dialogue must also allow for calm discussion among believers and non-believers. In the same spirit, those who belong to religious minorities must be protected. We note that people who do not share the belief of the majority too often face harassment and discrimination. It is the responsibility of each country to ensure that everyone feels free and respected within their religious or philosophical choices.

The freedom of religion and belief can be fully exercised only if the other human rights and fundamental freedoms are guaranteed. I am thinking in particular of the freedom of association and of expression. In the context of the sixtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which we will commemorate on 10 December, it is essential to reaffirm that the universality of human rights cannot be challenged. This is indeed a unique

opportunity to implement the obligations that the international community undertook in 1948.

Article 2 of the Declaration proclaims that no person can be discriminated against because of their religion or any other opinion. It adds, in article 18, that every person has the right to freedom of thought, belief and religion, and that this right includes both the freedom to change religion or belief and the freedom to practise one's religion or belief, alone or in community, both in public and in private.

The wise authors of the Universal Declaration described in simple but clear terms the fundamental obligations of States. These obligations are particularly meaningful today. What may have seemed natural 60 years ago might not be so today. This is why we must continue to be vigilant and to continue to implement the obligations in a spirit of tolerance and openness through a dialogue among individuals of varying beliefs.

To be truly fruitful, this dialogue must allow for true exchanges on the beliefs of each person. Religious pluralism is a kind of wealth. This wealth also means that the right to critique the beliefs of others, to discuss them and to dispute them must be guaranteed. We will not reduce tensions by preventing the expression of differing opinions. On the other hand, if that expression leads to incitement to religious hatred, it must be prohibited.

Over the past two days of debate, we have heard a number of calls for dialogue between religions and cultures. However, it is just as important to encourage dialogue within these religions, beliefs and cultures. Religions and beliefs must indeed present opportunities for exchange and communication, and not for imposition or constraint. The United Nations must of course continue to encourage that dialogue, but it must do so while preserving the independence of political and religious spheres. The dialogue between religions and beliefs must continue without political interference.

Belgium reaffirms its deep commitment to the freedom of each person to be able to practise his or her religion or belief. This policy is actively defended by our country, which not only recognizes a number of religions and beliefs and subsidizes them, but also ensures that no one's rights are challenged because of their beliefs.

In 2005, we created a commission on intercultural dialogue, which made a number of recommendations. The aim of the initiative was to ensure that Belgium continues to be an open society, within which people of different cultures and ideas can cooperate in a climate of openness and tolerance while adhering to the fundamental values of our Constitution and human rights. Belgium has been able to draw a distinction between religious matters and those of the State in a harmonious manner. For example, it has taken a number of measures in terms of education and access to jobs, and in particular offers students in primary and secondary school the choice between a course on a recognized religion, such as Islam or Judaism, and a course on secular ethics.

To conclude, Belgium hopes that today's initiative will make it possible to reaffirm that everyone has a right to live with their religious and philosophical choices without fear and without constraint, in harmony with the society in which they are living. The initiative should also reassure those who suffer under intolerance and discrimination due to their religion or belief, including acts of violence and intimidation, which continue to take place around the world. Education and dialogue at all levels of society are essential to bringing about greater tolerance and mutual understanding in order to identify what brings human beings closer together rather than what keeps them apart.

The Acting President: I give the floor to the representative of Nigeria.

Mr. Onemola (Nigeria): On behalf of the Nigerian delegation, I congratulate the President of the General Assembly on presiding over this high-level meeting on interfaith dialogue under agenda item 45 on the culture of peace.

I also congratulate His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on initiating this meeting aimed at deepening the dialogue among cultures, religions and faiths in order to seek solutions to the myriad problems facing the world.

As the world continues to shrink into a global village in response to the forces of globalization, we are faced with increasing contact among peoples of various cultures, races and religions. Our differences call for greater interaction through dialogue in order to bring about mutual understanding, without which we

will continue to experience the consequences of ignorance.

Nigeria is very passionate about the dividend of peace. It is perhaps only natural that we should continue to encourage the promotion of a culture of peace, not only because we are a multi-ethnic and multireligious society, but also because we have learned over the years to coexist as one despite our cultural, linguistic and religious diversity. While that may not be without its challenges, our country's people have become the better for it by learning to accept one another as the same people, despite our differences. Thus, for us, Nigeria is an embodiment of "unity in diversity" — a slogan that has come to be appreciated by all Nigerians.

To that end, the Nigerian Government has established the Nigeria Inter-religious Council with the mandate of promoting and fostering tolerance, understanding and solidarity among the major religious groups in the country. Furthermore, many States of the Federation have established similar interfaith councils with the deliberate objective of fostering tolerance and understanding. Additionally, we have established relevant agencies with support mandates to foster tolerance, understanding and solidarity. Those agencies include the National Boundary Commission, the Border Area Development Commission and the National Orientation Agency.

From our perspective, the strategy for building a culture of peace should focus on multifaceted and broad parameters, including the promotion of understanding one another's ways of life, devising means to resolve ongoing conflicts to prevent them from growing worse, developing institutional frameworks and relevant capacities for peace initiatives, and mobilizing resources at the national and regional levels for peace initiatives.

We also believe that the media could assist by targeting programmes that promote peace, religious tolerance and dialogue among all faiths with a view to preventing the defamation of religions and cultural values. We in Nigeria believe that it is possible for peoples of all faiths to coexist in peace and harmony. We hold dearly the right of every citizen to free speech, freedom of religious practice and healthy respect for one another's convictions. We therefore wish to call for continuous meetings of interfaith and intra-faith organizations and for the periodic organization of

seminars on topical issues that will facilitate the elimination of intolerance, disunity, conflicts and violence.

The promotion of peace and understanding through mutual dialogue, tolerance and respect for one another requires a collective effort. It is therefore pertinent for all of us to join hands in this endeavour in order to propel our world towards a more peaceful and prosperous future. We should also unite to de-emphasize the agents of strife and conflict among us as we pay greater attention to those issues that create a harmonious atmosphere, in order to guarantee for all the peoples of the world their full and fundamental human rights, especially as we commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We are convinced that our diversity has been put together for us by the divine Creator for our benefit, and not for our destruction; for our strength, and not for our weakness; for peace, and not for war. However, until we see it in that way, it will continue to be a negative force, rather than the positive one that we all talk about and desire. We need to make more effort to promote interfaith dialogue, as we believe that that will bring about an understanding of our differences and enable us to tap into our rich cultural diversity. It will overcome intolerance and hatred and all false notions about our various ethnic, cultural and religious affiliations so that we can truly live together in an atmosphere of peace and love.

In conclusion, let me share with the Assembly the concluding remarks made by my country's first Prime Minister at the fifteenth session of the General Assembly, on 7 October 1960, on Nigeria's assumption of membership in this Organization:

"Just one week ago the clocks were striking midnight and Nigeria was on the threshold of independence. There was a brief ceremony at which the leaders of three different faiths each said a brief prayer. We then realized, all of us, that however much we might imagine ourselves to be responsible for the happy occasion to independence, we realize that, above all, there is a divine Providence, and I do honestly believe that one primary essential for international friendship and cooperation is for each man to be true to his religious beliefs and to reaffirm the basic principles of his particular creed. It may be that

then, when we hear the world crying out for peace, we may receive the inspiration to deal with these intractable problems and be able really to devote all our resources to the advancement of mankind by applying those persistent eternal truths which will inevitably persist long after we ourselves are utterly forgotten.” (A/PV.893, para. 202)

We note the scene captured by Mr. Gordon Brown, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, contrasting a poor school with a well-to-do school in Nigeria. Let me assure all members that there are no institutions in which religious extremists are bred in Nigeria.

Nigeria stands ready to contribute to and support all efforts geared towards the development of a culture of peace.

The Acting President: I now call on the chairman of the delegation of Rwanda.

Mr. Nsengimana (Rwanda) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, my delegation would like to thank the Secretary-General for his report on interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace (A/63/262) and his report on the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, 2001-2010 (A/63/127). My delegation also thanks His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia for his contribution to the holding of this high-level debate.

The subject of a culture of peace reflects the ideals embodied in the Charter of the United Nations: to save succeeding generations from the scourge and to fight for the creation of a democratic and just international order based on the equal respect for the dignity of all human beings.

Whether these principles arise from faith in God or from simple humanism, respect for them by all States would undoubtedly bring peace and security to the world. Unfortunately, the reality of relations between States and among different religions and citizens of different civilizations, tribes and ethnicities appears throughout history to be rife with division and war. We think not only of the wars of religion in the Middle Ages, but also of our day-to-day lives in present times. We think of the various manifestations of terrorism, some more visible than others, but all detrimental to peace in the world. We think, within the

framework of the application of international law, of discrimination and bias of different protagonists.

I will give the Assembly an example of a case in which Rwanda is still a victim. Our head of State protocol was arrested in Germany on Sunday, 9 November 2008, while on an official trip, on the grounds of an arrest warrant issued by France that abused the principle of the universal jurisdiction, pursuant to a politically motivated report by a French judge. The principle of universal jurisdiction, like the Vienna Convention, is, however, an instrument designed to guarantee peace and order in the world. This example clearly shows how respect for human dignity and for conventions that should govern our world could restore peace and order in the world, and yet can be diverted in the service of the strong.

That is why a high-level meeting on the culture of peace makes full sense within our Organization. This is an opportunity to recall that the Charter of the United Nations has solutions that are beneficial to our diversity and that great cultures and great civilizations all preach dialogue, tolerance and respect for human dignity, and that international conventions regulate harmonious relations among peoples.

If we fill the breach of these divisions with the alliance of civilizations, religions and cultures, we will be able to respond to the founding ideals of the United Nations and for the progress of humanity.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to the chairman of the delegation of Thailand.

Mr. Pramudwinai (Thailand): At the outset, I wish to thank the President of the General Assembly at its sixty-third session for convening this landmark meeting. I would also like to extend, on behalf of the Government and the people of the Kingdom of Thailand, our sincere appreciation to and strong support for the commendable leadership of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Thailand also appreciates the active role of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo of the Philippines, our fellow member in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Thailand shares the noble objectives and aspirations that have been expressed during this meeting and is ready and willing to do whatever we can to support the realization of these objectives and

aspirations. Thailand is confident that this meeting will send a strong and unequivocal message to all corners of the world that world leaders are united in the common pursuit of mutual respect and understanding, dialogue, tolerance, harmony and peaceful coexistence.

Unity in diversity is what for many centuries has characterized a country that is today called Thailand. Peaceful coexistence is what the Thai people have grown up with and practised in their daily lives, at times subconsciously. Because of its openness and its strategic location between the Far East, South Asia, the Middle East and the West, Thailand has long been at the crossroads of civilizations, cultures, religions and movements of people. From the past to the present, many people of different civilizations, cultures and religions have made our land their home, where they have lived peacefully and harmoniously together as Thais.

Tolerance is also a part of who we are. That is why freedom to practise any religion or faith has been consistently guaranteed throughout the country's history. Today, while Buddhism is the religion practised by the majority of the Thai people, there are also thriving communities of Thai people who practise Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Confucianism and Sikhism. His Majesty the King of Thailand himself is a patron of all major faiths in the country.

For many who have visited Thailand, the sight of Buddhist temples, Islamic mosques, Christian churches, Hindu temples, as well as places of worship for Sikhism and Confucianism, all situated in the same vicinity is not at all uncommon. Nor is the sight of various cultural activities all year round that represents the diversity of the Thai nation. Interfaith and intercultural dialogue is indeed not just something we envision; it is part of our way of life. But we know that we cannot take this unity in diversity in Thailand or anywhere for granted, and we will not.

Forces unleashed by globalization have brought down physical barriers. Globalization driven by the advancement of information and communication technology has revolutionized the way that we see, feel and experience each other as a part of the human family. We are now closer to one another than at any time in human history.

Yet, the very same forces that brought us so close together have also driven many of us so far from each other. Closeness and sameness sometimes create fear in

many vulnerable hearts and minds — fear of losing one's perceived identity in the face of globalization. Unequal and unjust distribution of the fruits of globalization has also bred a sense of alienation among the have-nots. This fear and alienation, real or imagined, especially among youth, have been exploited by those who harbour hatred and intolerance for the other, those who have attempted to sow the seed of discord and disharmony in the soil of unity and harmony, and those who have distorted the compassionate and noble teachings of religions for their narrow self-serving interests.

These people of ill-will want to divide us. They want to make the clash of civilizations a self-fulfilling prophecy. But they will not succeed because we will not let them. It is important that we do all we can to unite when they want to divide, to reach out to each other where they want to separate, and, together, bring the full force of compassion and common humanity to bear on those who preach intolerance and the "us versus them" paradigm.

Unity, harmony and compassion have to be continuously nurtured and strengthened. Thailand is committed to actively promoting unity, harmony and compassion everywhere in the world because we believe that success in one part will contribute to the success of all, for we are part of the same human family. We have been involved in many initiatives, ranging from those at the community level to those at the national, regional, cross-regional and global levels.

For example, in June 2008, Thailand hosted, together with the Netherlands, the Fourth Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Interfaith Dialogue in Amsterdam. The Meeting brought together participants from Asia and Europe to meet face to face in order to have a "faith-to-faith" dialogue. Furthermore, as Chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Thailand will continue to work closely with our ASEAN family members to ensure that ASEAN will continue to be a shining example of unity in diversity. We will also continue to participate actively in various meetings within the framework of interfaith dialogue and the Alliance of Civilizations. In 2010, Thailand will host the Third Asia-Middle East Dialogue with the aim of enhancing mutual understanding and fostering closer ties between East Asia and the Middle East.

We view all those initiatives as mutually reinforcing, but we are also well aware of the fact that

the extent to which they succeed will depend on how well we translate ideas and wisdoms into concrete action for the benefit of our people on the ground. To that end, Thailand would like to highlight the following three key points.

First, multi-stakeholder leadership at all levels is vital. Political, religious and community leaders have key roles to play in promoting and reinforcing unity, harmony and compassion. Other sectors of society, especially the media, should also be brought on board. All of us should do all we can to ensure that the enhanced power of the media in this globalized world is channelled towards positive endeavours in pursuit of understanding, harmony and peace among various communities.

Secondly, we should strive to disseminate correct interpretations of the principles and teachings of our respective religions and faiths, while also promoting respect for other religions and faiths. Voices of moderation, tolerance and compassion should be promoted. So far, Thailand has been working closely with our friends in the region and beyond to encourage more frequent exchanges of religious leaders and scholars. We are truly grateful to all our friends near and far for their cooperation. We are particularly grateful to His Majesty King Abdullah bin Al Hussein of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan for graciously bringing the Amman Message to Thailand during his visit to Thailand in 2005. We were also very pleased at last year's visit to Thailand by Mr. Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar of Egypt. We were very touched by his message of peace, tolerance and harmony.

Thirdly, we must give all possible attention to our young people. We must instil love, compassion, mutual respect, tolerance and non-violence in them from an

early age. That can be done through both formal education and extracurricular activities. We must do our utmost to prevent a sense of alienation from developing in the minds of our young people, because that will make them vulnerable to intolerant ideologies.

As for those who have been alienated and exposed to intolerance, we must help them to unlearn those experiences and redirect them towards a right course of action. In that regard, Thailand has been promoting youth exchanges between various regions of the country and with other countries in various parts of the world in order to widen their world views and promote mutual understanding and the appreciation of differences. On that note, we see much relevance in the global youth cause, as called for two hours ago by the representative of the United Kingdom, and stand ready to support that idea.

Early next year, Thailand will host the ASEM Interfaith Cultural Youth Camp Project, which will provide a forum for Asian and European young people to get to know one another and to engage in interfaith and intercultural activities.

This General Assembly meeting is a powerful demonstration of global leadership that will certainly have profound implications. But it is not the end of the journey; rather, it marks a new chapter in the global effort to foster a culture of peace and promote interfaith dialogue. The challenge for us is to convey this message of peace, unity, compassion, tolerance and harmony to all houses, classrooms and community centres in each and every country, for when our peoples share a passion for compassion, the culture of peace will prevail.

The meeting rose at 6.05 p.m.