

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
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REMARKS TO PARTNERS FORUM OF THE
UN ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

AS DELIVERED

Istanbul, 31 May 2012

Prime Minister Erdoğan, let me begin by thanking you for your support and for hosting us today.

Five years ago, we launched the Alliance of Civilizations with the leadership of the Prime Ministers of Turkey and Spain.

Today, we meet to look to the next five years and beyond.

The Alliance was founded to advance the most noble of our common ideals - greater understanding among peoples and nations, a deeper embrace of global diversity.

On the fundamental issues of tolerance and cooperation - the Alliance has emerged as an increasingly important voice on the global stage.

But as we work for the world that we want, we are mindful of the world as it is.

This is a time of budget difficulties. There is growing competition for scarce financial resources.

Every day, the news headlines remind us of the uncertainties of our era:

The crisis in the Eurozone. Growing joblessness. Wider gaps between rich and poor.

Economic hard times everywhere mean economic difficulties for the United Nations as well.

We are doing more and more with less and less resources.

But the long-term solution is not just to simply tighten our belt. The larger challenge for any Organization - big or small - is to stay relevant in this age of austerity.

Our ultimate test is not how we talk of noble aspirations but how we deliver to the people who need our support.

The Alliance of Civilizations emerged in a time of turbulence.

This is an era of great transitions. And by their very definition, transitions bring forth tensions and expose hidden fault lines.

We have seen that clearly over the past year with the Arab Spring and, most urgently, in Syria.

Our mission on the ground -- the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria, or UNSMIS -- is there to help bring about a cease-fire. Our observers are the eyes and ears of the international community.

We are there to record violations and to speak out so that the perpetrators of crimes may be held to account. And that is what we did after last Friday's massacre in El-Houla, drawing on our own unbiased and incontestable evidence. The more the international community knows, the more likely it is that we can advance on our most important goal: to help find a political solution, a solution that safeguards the lives and interests of all the Syrian people.

Let me state plainly, however: the UN did not deploy in Syria just to bear witness to the slaughter of innocents. We are not there to play the role of passive observer to unspeakable atrocities.

The Joint Special Envoy, Mr. Kofi Annan, has expressed his concern that we may have reached a "tipping point" in Syria. The massacre of civilians of the sort seen last weekend could plunge Syria into a catastrophic civil war - a civil war from which the country would never recover.

I demand that the government of Syria act on its commitments under the Annan peace plan. A united international community demands that the Syrian government act on its responsibilities to its people.

In these difficult times, in the face of humankind's terrible capacity for inhumanity, it is all the more important for those of us here today to take a clear and principled stand. To speak out; and more, to act in the cause of peace, tolerance and harmony among people.

There are many fault lines - many regions in the world that could all too easily slide into conflict.

We hear a great deal about the so-called "clash of civilizations" - the supposed rift between predominantly Muslim and Western societies.

That is not what is going on in Syria. There, it is the old story of a tyranny seeking to hold power.

And in seeking to hold on to power, the regime threatens to exacerbate tensions among Syria's diverse people, much as we saw in the former Yugoslavia two decades ago.

Today, we see similar tensions in many other spheres of life, though certainly not so extreme.

We see them in the polarization that marks political discourse in many countries, in the debates about immigration and cultural identity in rich nations as well as poor, in the growing economic uncertainties that afflict people almost everywhere.

Together, we have looked upon these challenges - and we have seen that the world needed new approaches - new ways to address these big

questions.

We saw how human rights needed to be strengthened – particularly the rights and protections of minorities.

In societies torn by conflict, we have seen the imperative of reconciliation and the healing power of dialogue and mediation.

We have asked: How can we improve the way media and opinion leaders address sensitive cultural issues?

How can we better respond to the great “isms” of our day – radicalism, extremism and terrorism?

How can we better help immigrant communities to more fully engage in the social and political life of their host countries? How do we help break down barriers of mistrust and mutual suspicion?

Along the way, we discovered something important:

In addressing these challenges, we found that we do not need another large new multilateral agency. We did not need to build another big bureaucracy.

Rather, we needed to create a platform – a global platform. A platform where governments, civil society, young people, scholars, local authorities and the private sector could come together to innovate, share, support and build.

A platform wide enough for anyone in the world to step up and say: We stand for inclusive societies. We stand for tolerance and understanding.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Five years later, that platform is in place.

We call it the Alliance of Civilizations.

And every time we come together, as we do today, we appreciate its growing strength and reach.

We see it in the impressive Annual Forums that gather thousands of participants from every corner of the world.

We also see it through the exchanges that the Alliance arranges for young Arab, European and American leaders. Through award-winning youth projects that build bridges. Through support that the Alliance provides to innovative grassroots initiatives in collaboration with corporate partners such as the BMW Group.

We see it as the Alliance teams up with universities to engage with policymakers on topics ranging from media literacy to education to the diversity of religious belief.

We see it through our team of experts who spring into action in times of crisis, who speak out for tolerance and against racial or cultural

stereotypes.

Most important, we see it through you – our ever-expanding network of partners.

All of these efforts are innovative. They are cost-effective.

But we know they are still not done on a scale that matches the challenge.

The Alliance has space to do more and to be more.

As we know, that requires additional operational capacity, even if the Alliance is to essentially remain a match-maker. That means broader financial and in-kind support from a wider circle of partners. I salute the growing contributions of corporations and foundations – as well as more creative partnerships.

As President Sampaio rightly says: “The Alliance can only deliver if you deliver with us. You are the Alliance”.

That is precisely the aim of this first Partners Forum: to encourage public and private partners to invest in the Alliance and ensure that all voices are heard.

Supporting the Alliance is all the more necessary because much has changed in the past five years.

Think of the rapid transformations in the ways we communicate ... the challenges and opportunities of the Arab Spring ... the way young people have used technology to give new meaning to the power of democratic governance.

The challenge before us now is how to enable the Alliance of Civilizations to play an even more constructive role on the issues that confront us.

Your ideas, your energy, your support is essential.

For example, the Alliance could have an important mediating role in the many conflicts where culture or religion come into play.

I am not talking about traditional political work of getting various antagonists to sit down at the negotiating table.

I mean mediation in the broader and more difficult sense of helping societies to change, to move from a culture of conflict to a culture of acceptance, to embrace reconciliation rather than anger and the language of hate.

To solve our most intractable global challenges, I believe that we need to think across borders and other lines that might divide.

I believe we must cooperate to repair relations between cultures.

I believe our future is one of greater interconnectedness and interdependence.

That is why I believe in the Alliance.

I thank you for believing in it, too - through your commitments and your actions.

This work has no endpoint. We can never declare victory. This is a never-ending mission.

Let us continue to build on our progress, strengthen our partnerships, and deliver for our world.

I thank you very much for your commitment.

Thank you.