

Agenda Item 25: United Nations Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations

***Statement by Mr. T.C.A. Rangachari, Additional Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs
on November 8, 2001***

Mr. President,

We thank the Secretary General for his report A/56/523 on the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, a welcome initiative of the Islamic Republic of Iran. We would like to express our appreciation to the eminent persons who collaborated in producing the book 'Crossing the Divide: Dialogue among Civilizations'. We would also like to convey our appreciation to the Member States who have arranged events to give content and meaning to this Year.

2. As the Year designated by the General Assembly as the UN Year of Dialogue among Civilizations draws to a close, it seems appropriate that we reflect on the concepts and ideas that have emerged in this process.

3. Dialogue among civilizations is not new. It has existed since the earliest known civilizations. This dialogue, which spans many millennia, has blurred the boundaries of different civilizations. The world today cannot claim a finite number of distinct civilizations; it is, in fact, the whole of a multitude of overlapping cultures. Cultural intercourse, while blurring civilizational boundaries, has not, however, undermined the richness of cultural diversity.

4. Culture and civilization are not static. They change, in adaptation to changes in their environment. The process of seeking new solutions to emerging problems is a continuing one. The absorption of ideas from other cultures assists in this process.

5. While societies adopt the best practices of others, they also retain their own uniqueness. They do so because they instinctively feel a sense of belonging and of inheritance. They also do so because their own circumstances are never identical with those of others.

6. It has been stated, in some of the documentation of the Secretariat, that there are two groups of civilizations - one which perceives diversity as a threat and the other which sees it as an opportunity. Such a differentiation is simplistic and dangerous. The Dialogue among Civilizations which has taken place over the years has eroded the ignorance caused by ethnocentrism and led to the understanding that all human societies possess their respective civilization and culture.

7. It is but natural that each society would seek to protect and preserve its civilizational and cultural values. The dialogue process creates apprehension, even as it generates expectations. Apprehension is based on perceived attempts of one civilization, one culture - derived from theories of superiority and, its obverse, inferiority - to overwhelm another. The underlying assumption is that the superior will be stronger and will, therefore, prevail. Dialogue, however, leads us to the understanding that there is neither an inferior nor a superior. Civilizations are not equal. Each is unique in its

evolution. Yet, no one civilization will prevail over the other; there will be no 'end of history'.

8. Civilizations are different but there is commonality in civilizational values and achievements. Even in times when there was little communication between them, great civilizations of the past in Asia, the Middle-East, and in America managed to create much the same irrigation systems. Beyond the shared genetic material and evolution of technology, there is, and has always been, a similarity in approach that different civilizations have taken to issues of ethics. This is not surprising. Value systems have relevance to human situations. And there is the common strand of humanity which threads itself through all these situations. The right to life, for instance, enjoys primacy in all civilizations. There are others. Our dialogue, over the past half a century, has allowed these to be codified into internationally accepted instruments which serve to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. There is, at the same time, a difference in emphasis arising from civilizational and cultural ethos. It manifests itself in tension generated by the recognition of the universality of fundamental human rights juxtaposed with duties of individuals towards society and societal rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights speaks of rights as well as duties. There is, and there will always be, in every civilization an attempt to find a balance between the individual and the, larger, common good.

9. Dialogue among civilizations has enlarged the common denominator of values and principles that we should be governed by. These include the values of liberal and participative democracy, of rule of law, of tolerance. They should not be construed as an imposition, nor should one civilization or the other claim proprietary rights over them. It can be argued, for instance, that the village republics of ancient India have been the enlightened predecessors for modern day concepts of decentralised and participative political institutions.

10. It is this universality of human values that terrorism denies. The terrorist belongs to no civilization. He rejects tolerance and diversity as values central to all civilizations. The perpetrators of the acts of September 11 - and those who perpetrate acts of terrorism elsewhere - are the rejects of their own civilizations. Their identification can only be with those states who harbor, aid, abet and support them, even glorify them. To allow terrorists and the states who nurture them to hijack our discourse would be to give them a legitimacy which belongs only to the civilised.

11. India, over the centuries, has been the meeting place of different cultures. The Indic civilization is the result of several cultural fusions. It encompasses the philosophical tenets of idealism and materialism, of religion and secularism, an affirmation of its own identity and a willingness for integrative globalisation. We cherish our tolerance; we celebrate our diversity. We do so because of our belief in, and acceptance of, the fundamental unity of all humanity.

12. This Dialogue among Civilizations should continue. It will, we hope, contribute to greater harmony among civilizations.