

UNITED NATIONS



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**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL  
BAN KI-MOON  
REMARKS AT OPENING OF FIFTH GLOBAL FORUM  
OF THE UNITED NATIONS ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS**

**Vienna, 27 February 2013**  
**(as delivered)**

I thank the Government of Austria and the city of Vienna for hosting this Global Forum.

I also thank the governments of Turkey, Spain, Qatar and Brazil for their generous support to the Alliance over the last five years.

I am glad to be back in Vienna, where cultures meet and mingle.

Last November, I inaugurated the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue.

At that time, I expressed my concern about chronic and emerging divisions along cultural and sectarian lines.

I said that durable solutions need long-term mutual understanding that transcends religious, national, cultural and ethnic boundaries.

Such understanding comes from responsible leadership – the theme of this forum.

No country, no culture is immune.

In too many places, anti-Muslim sentiment has become commonplace.

Migrants from all backgrounds are vilified instead of embraced.

When such attitudes are left unchallenged, racists feel empowered.

From the world stage to local communities, leaders need to speak the language of tolerance and respect, not division and defamation.

Wherever tensions divide communities, the opportunity exists for the Alliance to build bridges and to help people move from conflict to collaboration.

It is particularly important for the Alliance to work where risk is greatest.

In Pakistan, the Alliance has worked with Sunni and Shia to build understanding and defuse tensions that are causing so much loss of life.

In Mindanao, the Alliance is addressing a long history of Muslim-Christian violence by helping both communities to work together to foster job creation and solve youth unemployment.

In Kenya, the Alliance worked with youth to defuse growing tensions between Kenyans and Somali-Kenyan communities. More broadly, with general elections scheduled for Monday, March 4<sup>th</sup>, I call on all Kenyans to promote dialogue, reject violence and use the elections as an act of national unity.

Today I want to talk about three situations that are especially urgent and where the Alliance is well placed to contribute – the ongoing impasse between Israelis and Palestinians and the conflicts in Mali and Syria.

First, let me tell you something about the current situation in Syria.

The country is an extraordinary mosaic of tribes, ethnicities, languages and religions.

I am extremely concerned about the risk of sectarian violence and mass reprisals as the situation continues to worsen.

When the conflict ends, Syrians will need help to rebuild damaged relationships so all can work together to restore their nation.

The Alliance encourages efforts by partners – notably religious leaders from all denominations – to foster healing.

In Mali, the extremists are in retreat, but not yet defeated.

Their wanton desecration of sacred sites launched a global shockwave of outrage.

In Timbuktu, brave men and women risked their lives to protect rare and ancient manuscripts. In this regard, I highly commend the efforts and leadership of the Director-General of UNESCO, Madame Irina Bokova.

The United Nations will focus on rebuilding and safeguarding Mali's heritage as part of a broader strategy for peace, security and development.

The Alliance could help to re-stitch Mali's tattered tapestry by engaging religious and community leaders, grassroots organizations and youth.

The country – indeed the whole Sahel region -- faces many challenges.

But they can be overcome much more quickly if all communities collaborate to address the underlying causes of extremism and environmental degradation that are impeding poverty reduction and sustainable development.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Movement in the Middle East Peace process is overdue.

Each day wasted takes us further from the agreed goal of a two-state solution.

A durable peace requires the resumption of meaningful negotiations backed by international engagement.

But Israelis and Palestinians remain polarized.

I am particularly worried about the region's youth.

A generation of young people on both sides is at risk of growing up with a demonized, dehumanized – and utterly false – concept of their neighbours.

They must be empowered to co-exist peacefully with their neighbours.

I urge the Alliance to support peacemakers on both sides, as it has done with Aziz Abu Sarah.

A Palestinian raised in Jerusalem, Aziz was 12 years old when his brother was killed.

His first response was anger and frustration and radicalization. As a teenager, he wanted revenge.

But as he matured he realized he had a choice. He chose not to hate.

As Aziz says, and I quote:

“Walls that separate people are often built on ignorance, hatred and fear. I try to put cracks in those walls. When people realize they feel the same pain, they begin to see how much we all have in common.” End of quote.

Aziz now works to advance mutual understanding, creating tours of the Holy Land that show both sides' views.

The Alliance is helping the project by providing the means to expand it to other countries, such as Egypt and Jordan.

We must support more of this kind of work – especially among the youth who can lead our world from conflict to harmony.

That is why I have recently appointed the United Nations first-ever special Envoy on Youth, Mr. Ahmad Alhendawi who is a Jordanian, 29 years old, very dynamic and visionary man..

And it is why I am so committed to the success of the Alliance of Civilizations.

I would like thank President Sampaio for ably guiding this Alliance for six years.

He spearheaded tremendous growth in the number of participants, from an initial 67 countries to now 136 members today.

He oversaw the development of a wide range of cross-cultural programmes, and put in place a structure that will continue to grow. I again thank President Sampaio for his service and contributions.

Now, please join me as well in welcoming his successor, His Excellency, Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser.

As President of the General Assembly, President Al-Nasser placed significant emphasis on tolerance and mutual understanding, and reached out regularly to partners in civil society, academia, the business community and the philanthropic world.

He and I had a special very productive working relationship, and I look forward to us collaborating closely in his new role as high representative of the Alliance of Civilizations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Alliance of Civilizations is an initiative of tremendous importance. At this time of test for the human family, let us all do our part to see it thrive.

Thank you very much for your leadership.