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ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

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THE ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

5th GLOBAL FORUM

Opening

Youth Event

Vienna, 26 February 2013

Dear Secretary of State for Integration, Mr. Sebastian Kurz,

Dear Friends,

- First of all, let me welcome you all to the youth event of the 5th Global Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations!
- Mr. Kurz, many thanks for making time to be with me here this morning to welcome our youth.
- As you may know together here for the three-day Forum we have around 150 youth, aged from 18 to 35 years from 100 countries, all representing youth-led organizations or educational institutions.
- In my personal name but also on their behalf, let me express our most wholehearted thanks for the wonderful hospitality extended to them and for hosting this special Youth event.
- Mr. Secretary of State, I read somewhere that you are “the youngest visionary politician in Austria with a very bright future”. So, I congratulate you and wish you well! But what I would like to ask you is the following: what piece of the advice would you like to give to these young people who most probably are already leaders to strive in life and become politically involved in change?
- This is what I would like to hear from you and most probably they also would be very keen on knowing more on this issue from you!
- Now on my side, as an old retired politician who for almost six years led the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, what I would like to pass on to you are two strong messages.

- The first one regards your role as driving forces for change.
- I firmly believe that youth can change the world – with their bold vision of the future, their resolve and their commitment to action.
- However, what I have also witnessed over the past years, namely in the context of various youth activities organized by the UNAOC, is that a stronger sense of responsible leadership is needed to achieve change!
- I hope you will not see this remark as dictated by my golden age!
- But to be honest with you, I think that your potential for making change is sometimes undermined by stereotypes and prejudices that hold most probably without you realizing it!
- This is why I think the Vienna Forum is a great opportunity for you to reflect about what is responsible leadership, what it entails in terms of unlearning stereotypes and prejudices, unlearning intolerance, unlearning discrimination.
- Furthermore, let me give you a piece of advice – if you want to make the world a better place to live in, why don't you start by looking around and asking this question: what can I do for my neighbor, what can I do to bring together efforts between East and West, North and South?
- Here, allow me to have a thought for your fellow youths in Syria who are enduring a devastating conflict - having their country destroyed, their society broken and their families mourning their deaths.
- Did you ever wonder what you can do for your Syrian fellows? Did you ever try to know how you can contribute to mitigate the impact of this deadly conflict? How you can show some kind of active solidarity?

- Well – I am giving the example of Syria – because it is here in our neighborhood and because it is a shocking example of our collective failure to prevent and resolve deadly conflicts. But many other examples of man-made humanitarian catastrophes could be given.
- In this regard, let me draw your attention to a wonderful project that an organization from civil society is putting forward – an exchange program to host Syrian students in our countries, in our families, to contribute to alleviate this terrible humanitarian crisis.
- This is the kind of action in which you can get involved very easily! Join in, if I may urge you to make a concrete commitment to action!
- Receiving in your family under the same roof a fellow from another country is furthermore a terrific experience of intercultural learning and understanding!
- Dear Secretary of State, did you know that this project I am talking about was inspired by an interesting and successful story that happened with your country, Austria, and my country, Portugal?
- It actually occurred between 1946 and 1948 during the darkest period of the European history, when thousands of Austrian children were sent to Portugal and lived with host families around the country. These children escaping from the war were offered a normal time, enjoying family life and being welcomed as siblings.
- This unique initiative was a kind of humanitarian action *avant la lettre* led by what today we would call the civil society of both countries who really built bridges across divides and engaged in intercultural learning.

- The project that I am talking about is inspired by this touching story!

Dear Friends,

- My second point regards the mission and goals underpinning the Alliance of Civilizations.
- As you know the Alliance aims at promoting cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue in order to bring people together, to promote cultural understanding, trust and cooperative action across divides.
- However, as you know sometimes words do not match the reality and there is a certain divorce between principles and practices.
- Indeed, it is always better to quarrel with words than to throw stones. But most of the times, words are good but not enough if we want to make the world a happier place than it is. In other words, we need to do more than just talk.
- This means that these opportunities to meet and interact represented by these youth events and forums are not ends in themselves but they should be seen as platforms for collective and/or collaborative action towards confronting intolerance and extremism.
- Making recommendations is fantastic but only if they are taken seriously, if they serve to generate political commitment, to mobilize communities, to enhance responsible leadership at all levels.

- So what I want to stress is that youth leadership is a very important layer of and for change.
- As a former youth activist I know what I mean, I know what it means.
- You will see me tomorrow challenging the participants to embark on a bold vision for the Alliance that offers measurable goals to meet and make people and countries accountable through ownership. This vision I called “getting to zero strategy”.
- We need to galvanize global commitment and to mobilize communities to get to zero new intolerance-related incidents; to get to zero intolerance-related deaths; to get to zero discrimination.

Dear Friends,

- As I draw to a close, let me tell you a story. At one of the Summer Schools, organized in August by the Alliance of Civilizations, and bringing together over 170 young people from 70 countries, for the closing ceremony all participants were invited to summarize the whole week’s experience in one word.
- All were ecstatic and used sparkling words – a lifetime feeling; love; hope; unique; accomplishment; peace and alike. However one participant chose to whisper “possibility”, a very word that resonated quite dramatically in that almost euphoric atmosphere.
- This story serves only to highlight the need for some deep thinking about the persistent tensions between East and West; about the bad relations between Muslim and Western publics with both sides holding negative stereotypes of

the other; and how a tremendous level of hostility and animosity is ever present that needs only the slightest prod to explode.

- This is ultimately an indication about how much the Alliance of Civilizations is a timely and rightful UN initiative, but is also a painful reminder to me that our work at the Alliance is far from done.
- We must redouble our efforts to bridge cultural divides, promote cross-cultural understanding, trust and mutual respect among and within societies, at all levels – international, regional, national and local – and fields of action – from education to youth and media.
- In democratic societies and increasingly all over the world, people are free to voice their rights. Let's combine our voices and work together to address in an appropriate way the alarming rise of extremism, religious hatred and hate speech, all of which undermine people's expectations of a better life in dignity, freedom and security.
- We need to be bold and take action urgently to turn the possibility of living together in diversity, dialogue, respect and peace into reality.
- I am sure you are ready to commit to action!
- I wish you good work.
- Many thanks.