

***Speech by Mr Gilles de Kerchove, Counter-terrorism Coordinator
at the Euromed ad hoc meeting on counter-terrorism (13 November 2007)***

Inter-cultural dialogue

Introduction

Terrorism, or support for and incitement to terrorism, can never be justified. The full extent of the law should be used to pursue and punish those involved in terrorism. But in the long term we can only eradicate this scourge if we venture beyond the well-trodden path of law enforcement and develop a comprehensive approach to counter it. The EU has long recognised that it is necessary to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. Prevention is the first of four strands of counter-terrorism policy set out in the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy (December 2005).

You may have heard this before, but it can never be said enough: the EU unreservedly rejects any attempt to identify one religion or civilisation with terrorism. This point has rightly been made again in the conclusions of the last meeting of Euromed Ministers in Lisbon (5-6 November 2007). Terrorism is a method to pursue political objectives; as such, it is not confined to one belief system or political persuasion. While terrorists kill and maim indiscriminately, the current wave of terrorism has made more victims in Muslim countries than elsewhere. Therefore, the EU seeks partnerships with Muslims in countering the terrorist threat.

This implies that we do not impose our ideas on our partners, but strive to forge a consensus on the basis of shared values. Tolerance, openness and genuine respect for diversity are preconditions for such a consensus. We are all committed to upholding universal human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of expression and the freedom to exercise any religion or no religion at all. These constitute the basis for the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and provide the necessary common ground for our consensus on the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, as outlined in the Euromed Code of Conduct.

Terrorists do not respect international borders or cultural differences. On the contrary, extremist ideologues exploit these to generate hatred, justify the use of violence, and recruit vulnerable young people. Terrorists are the world's greatest proponents of the discredited thesis of a "clash of civilisations". Theirs is a discourse of "us versus them". We must prove them wrong by seeking mutual understanding and joint solutions.

Governments must make sure they do not inadvertently corroborates the messages of the terrorists. If we speak *in* their terms, we are forced to fight the struggle for hearts and minds *on* their terms. In consequence, governments should take care to avoid any form of discourse that could strengthen Bin Laden's propaganda of a Western onslaught on Islam. If Bin Laden attempts to justify his atrocities by implausibly equating these with a "Jihad", it is crucial for governments not to employ similar terminology.

Perhaps even more important are equal opportunities for all. Exclusion generates frustration and alienation and is thus a condition conducive to the spread of terrorism. We should therefore continue to fight all forms of discrimination, racism and xenophobia, including Islamophobia. The EU does that in many ways, for example through its Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, based in Vienna. We should also work hard to guarantee universal access to education that equips young people with the skills they need in the labour market.

Inter-cultural dialogue: purpose of inter-cultural dialogue in the framework of counter-terrorism

A genuine dialogue between people of various cultures and religions can greatly contribute to the reinforcement of a climate hostile to terrorism. Such a dialogue in and of itself constitutes a clear rebuttal of the propaganda of the extremists, who project an image of monolithic and immutable civilisations living in eternal enmity. A dialogue between religious leaders allows them to identify and emphasise shared values of all faiths, thereby delegitimising the message of terrorists who often have scant knowledge of their own religion. Inter-cultural and interfaith dialogue meetings also help to dispel false notions - unfortunately still present among some in Europe - of an intolerant and aggressive Islam. Ultimately, inter-cultural understanding enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of our counter-terrorism policies, because it demonstrates that these are not directed against one community or religion.

Therefore, as a EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, I fully recognise the benefits of inter-cultural dialogue to (what has been dubbed as) "the struggle for hearts and minds". I do feel, however, that we should be honest and realistic about its limitations as well. Inter-cultural understanding will not persuade extremists to abandon their prejudices. Nor will a civilised dialogue between well-meaning leaders of various faith groups prompt religious fanatics to embrace moderation. Inter-cultural dialogue is aimed at the prevention of radicalisation of vulnerable individuals, not at the de-radicalisation of those who already espouse extremist views.

Governments have a limited role to play in this area. They are not well placed to conduct such a dialogue themselves, for they cannot claim to be the sole representatives of a culture or religion. They represent all of their nationals, not just those belonging to the ethnic, cultural or religious majority in their country. Governments should recognise that identities are complex and multi-faceted: it is not appropriate to categorise people solely on the basis of their faith or cultural background. But governments can facilitate inter-cultural dialogue by supporting grass-roots initiatives in various ways. That is exactly what the EU is doing.

Alliance of Civilisations

To give you a very important example: the European Union is a strong supporter of the Alliance of Civilisations initiative, proposed by Spain and Turkey. I would like to recall here that, at the last Euromed Ministerial Meeting, "Ministers welcomed the Alliance of Civilizations Initiative and its possible contribution to the Barcelona Process."

The gist of the Alliance of Civilisations project is in line with a number of EU initiatives in the field of promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding. The EU has supported the Alliance from its outset and is committed to backing Mr Sampaio to put into practice the implementation plan following the recommendations of the report of the High level group. We think it is time for concrete action.

At the AoC Group of Friends Ministerial Meeting on 26 September, Mr Sampaio urged Member States and multilateral agencies to develop "national strategies" to advance the objectives of the AoC at the local, national and regional levels. I am pleased to note that a number of EU governments are currently doing this.

As far as action on multi-lateral level is concerned, I would like to mention one of the projects which seem to me as a "quick win": The Rapid Response Media Mechanism to Address Cross-Cultural Tensions, to be mobilized when an event that threatens to polarise communities along religious or cultural lines occurs. We have lived already these situations in the past and they will inevitably happen again. I believe that the rapid mobilisation of influential voices (religious

leaders, but also political leaders like us , even celebrities and sportspeople) in the 'teachable moments' of the crisis are key to help diffusing the crisis in close link with the media.

In addition to the Alliance of Civilisations, a number of other initiatives for enhancing dialogue and mutual understanding have recently been presented at the UN. In order to effectively move forward the agenda of dialogue and tolerance, these initiatives should be carried out in a coordinated, coherent, and complementary manner, within the existing institutional framework. The EU regards the Alliance of Civilisations as a potential focal point for the increasing number of initiatives and projects. Through a better coordination of initiatives rather than their proliferation, we improve our chances of success.

Inter-cultural dialogue projects

But the EU is doing more. On the basis of a proposal from the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council have decided to make 2008 the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. The objectives of this project will be to promote inter-cultural dialogue as a process in which all those living in the EU can improve their ability to deal with a cultural environment in which different identities and beliefs coexist; highlight inter-cultural dialogue as an opportunity to contribute to and benefit from a diverse society, not only in Europe but world-wide; promote European citizenship; and highlight the contribution of different cultures to European societies.

The European Commission has developed a wide range of programmes that promote inter-cultural understanding. Of particular relevance in this context are projects in the areas of education, youth and culture. The Erasmus Mundus programme offers to third country students and scholars to participate in selected courses at European universities. It has recently been agreed to enhance the participation of Mediterranean Partners in the Programme. In the academic year 2007-2008 the grants will be provided to 549 students from Mediterranean countries totaling nearly €15 million. The Tempus programme funds projects for cooperation between universities in the EU and its ENP partners, in order to facilitate educational reform, mutual learning and inter-cultural understanding. The Commission also fosters inter-cultural dialogue at national level in third countries. (The Philippine interfaith and multi-cultural dialogues are an example of an important project carried out with EU support.) In addition, the Commission has issued a Communication on a European Agenda for Culture in a Globalising World, proposing the first ever European strategy for culture. The strategy mentions the promotion of cultural diversity and inter-cultural dialogue, both internally and in the Union's external relations, as priority.

The EU also works with external partners to promote inter-cultural understanding. In the framework of ASEM - the Asia Europe Meeting - the EU and its Asian partners annually hold a number of thematic inter-cultural dialogue meetings, as well as meetings on interfaith dialogue. The Euro-Mediterranean partnership constitutes the most advanced structure for multi-national inter-cultural cooperation available to the European Union. Through the Barcelona process, Europe and its Mediterranean neighbours cooperate in the fields of education, the fight against discrimination, and the promotion of democracy.

The Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures promotes exchanges between the civil societies of EU countries and their Mediterranean partners. It facilitates the coordination of 35 networks, with programmes in the fields of the media, youth and education. In my view, the Anna Lindh Foundation is a unique instrument to enhance understanding and interaction between our populations at grass-roots level. In this context, I should mention, in particular, the EuroMed Civil Society Platform, a forum for NGOs from all partner states.

Concluding remarks

Let me conclude by emphasising that security is not the only, or even the primary, factor that motivates us to foster inter-cultural cooperation. Inter-cultural dialogue has inherent value, quite apart from its beneficial effects to our joint political agenda.

This presents us with a dilemma. On the one hand, the "counter-terrorism label" is too limited to describe the purpose of inter-cultural dialogue. Its application could even discredit the whole exercise. But on the other hand, inter-cultural cooperation is gaining increasing prominence in the context of the prevention of terrorism. Some of those who criticise our counter-terrorism policies and action plans for being too oriented to law enforcement, also reject our initiatives to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism because counter-terrorism officials are involved. As previously mentioned, I recognise that it best if others - not counter-terrorism officials - take the lead in inter-cultural dialogue as such. But let me state very clearly here that, in my view, prevention is a crucial part of any counter-terrorism policy.

Thus, the EU fully supports the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy adopted by the UN General Assembly, in which prevention (including inter-cultural dialogue) has a very prominent place. The Strategy fits very well with the EU's own Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which the Union and its Member States will continue to implement. We are keen to build on our cooperation with you in this area. More than any other aspect of counter-terrorism, our policies aimed at prevention are likely to benefit from Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.