Speech by Mr Bacre Waly Ndiaye

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful for the invitation to participate in the international commemoration of the 1981 Declaration on the elimination of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. This 25th anniversary conference is an important occasion to reflect on one of the most basic freedoms of all: the freedom of religion or belief.

The city of Prague is a very fitting place to hold such an event as the two defenestrations went down in history and were both intimately linked with religious conflicts. The first defenestration in 1419 at the Prague town hall was a turning point of the existing tensions and it finally led to the Hussite Wars. The second defenestration in 1618, this time at Prague Castle, played an important role in the initiation of the Thirty Years’ War, which at the outset used to be a religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics. So, in the words of former Czech President and famous poet Václav Havel, the past of Czech lands is “marked by brutal acts of violence carried out in the name of religion”. Five years ago, just a month after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States, he sent an intriguing message to the Representatives of World Religions here in Prague in St. Vitus’s Cathedral:

We believe the time has come to create a kind of ‘Grand Spiritual Coalition’, which would enhance the existing endeavors at the co-operation of the world’s religions, and their joint efforts to confront together the forces of destruction in the name of respect for life and human dignity, the brotherhood and equality of nations, and a just world order, as well as concern for the interests of future generations. The task of such a ‘spiritual coalition’ would be to seek and promote the basic ethical values shared by people of good will everywhere, and in the spirit of those values to influence the life of the world community.¹

Indeed, the world community needs a global strategy to promote the basic ethical values and human rights, especially nowadays in the age of globalization. I would

¹ Full text of the speech available online at http://old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/2001/1610_u_k.html
like to highlight some of the main issues demanding our attention in the area of freedom of religion or belief. The focus of my speech will be to provide you with an overview of some recent activities undertaken by the United Nations and particularly by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

OHCHR’s mission is to work for the protection of all human rights for all people; to help empower people to realize their rights; and to assist those responsible for upholding such rights in ensuring that they are implemented.

Which steps have the United Nations undertaken to address the current issues concerning freedom of religion or belief? Several recent developments are worthwhile noting, both at the UN level and also with regard to reports by Special Rapporteurs, UN treaty bodies and OHCHR.

In July 2005, the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan launched the Alliance of Civilizations, an initiative which is co-sponsored by the Prime Ministers of Spain and Turkey. The Secretary-General appointed a panel of 20 experts in order to explore ways of addressing the increasing polarization between Muslim and Western societies. Last week, this High Level Group presented its final report to the Secretary-General. The experts maintain that although religion is often cynically exploited to stir passions, fuel suspicions and support alarmist claims that the world is facing a new “war of religion”, the root of the matter is political. The Report also puts forward a range of concrete proposals in the areas of education, media, youth and migration to build bridges and promote a culture of respect and understanding among Western and Muslim communities.

Upon receiving the High Level Group’s report, Kofi Annan stressed that “we need to get away from stereotypes, generalizations and preconceptions, and take care not to let crimes committed by individuals or small groups dictate our image of an entire people, an entire region, or an entire religion”. In September 2006, the Secretary-General submitted a report on the issue of “Combating defamation of religions” to the General Assembly. He concluded that there is a will on the part of Member States, the United Nations system and the wider international community to counter religious intolerance, but that much more needs to be done.

Several special procedures mandate holders have recently highlighted the problems in this regard. The Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ms. Asma Jahangir, has observed a marked increase in the level of religious intolerance in many regions of the world. She identified religious minorities as the main victims of violations of the right of freedom of religion or belief. We have to bear in mind that a certain religion may be a minority in one part of the world and suffer accordingly, however, it may constitute the religion of the majority of the population in another part of the world.

Mr. Doudou Diène, the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, noted a serious upsurge in manifestations of discrimination against Muslims and Arab peoples and acts of