Check against delivery

STATEMENT BY PROF. DR. MEHMET AYDIN, MINISTER OF STATE

OF THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY

UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL, 4TH SESSION

GENEVA, 13 MARCH 2007

Mr. President,
Madam High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I am taking the floor for the first time since the inauguration of this august body, let me congratulate you on your election as the President and also, thank you for your tireless efforts.

The establishment of the new Human Rights Council in 2006 is a milestone in the long journey of human freedom and security. With the Human Rights Council, the cause of human rights has entered a new era. For much of the past 60 years, our focus has been on articulating, codifying and enshrining rights. Needless to say, the era of declaration is now giving way, as it should, to an era of implementation. Our task is to make sure that the jurisprudence created in this area is observed and respected. To that end, the new Human Rights Council must be a society of the committed and should reflect the universality of human rights. However, the task is not easy, for the United Nations is a body that reflects many diverse constituencies, voicing many diverse priorities, needs and hopes.

Honesty also compels us to confess that today the whole world is facing an irksome predicament regarding a full and consistent respect for international institutions such as the UN, international law and human rights which are usually evaluated inconsistently and defended selectively not only in the so-called democratically developing countries but also in developed countries. The order of dominant power is not at all, unfortunately, in keeping with the order of right and freedom, although it is very clear that a humane co-existence requires a cognitive agreement on international human rights principles and universal commitment to their full and consistent application. And we all know that this is not the case even in countries where rights and democratic values have so far been considered fairly solid and consolidated. In other words, democracy is now becoming more and more fragile in the so-called Western countries as well. This is happening at a time when the new and restored democracies are looking for better and more successful examples or even models if you like.

For the sake of elaboration let us have a brief look at certain policies regarding the process of integration which raises "a number of challenges including difficulties for immigrants in accessing education and social service system and in overcoming restriction in housing and job opportunities, barriers to becoming full citizens and experiences of racism and xenophobia, especially Islamophobia in recent years." Immigrant populations are increasingly fearful of encroachment of fundamental civil liberties, despite the adoption of the "European Employment Strategy, and the establishment of the "European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia". Social and Cultural Rights were adopted by the General Assembly forty years ago (1966). We have begun to raise many obstacles concerning, for example, teaching mother tongue or culture and to confuse multi-culturalism with cultural relativism. Can you imagine that a first class politician and a top minister of a government defends a policy which aims at prohibiting school children to speak their mother tongue not in classrooms only but in the garden of their school as well.

In a functioning human rights regime integration ought to start in the public sphere that is largely defined by fundamental rights and freedoms which we consider "universal" in some sense. No one has the right to ask others to leave their cultural values behind in the process of integration. Nor does anyone have the right to ask for a democratic tolerance for those cultural or traditional practices that openly infringe upon one or the other fundamental human right.

We all know that security is a must. But we equally know that democracy, which is based on human rights, is not only a governance of good and peaceful days. Security measures should be taken not *in spite of* human rights or democratic spirit but *in accordance with* them. To take harsh security measures without exhausting democratic ways and means is definitely counter-productive in terms of peace and security themselves. In other words, those who work hard for the sake of *stability* at *the expense of human rights* might lose both of them. Investing in a growing human rights regime seems to be the best guarantee, in the long run, for the existence of a stable society. Autocratic regimes failed to see this fact and today they have neither a functioning human rights socio-political system nor stability at home.

Democratic rights and values face another threat that should not be left unmentioned. This is the raising wave of *culturalism* which expresses itself through manifold arguments which claim monopoly over human rights and the values that underlie them. A typical *culturalist argument* keeps on talking of "Western values", "European values" or "Judeo-Christian values". They discuss, for instance, whether Islam, as a faith, culture and civilization, is compatible with such values as respect for human dignity, justice, rule of law, accountability, transparency, tolerance, pluralism and so on. Needless perhaps to say that the usual answer is "no". For them "Islam itself is the issue". This essentialist, fundamentalist, imperialist and even racialist approach to fundamental human rights and commonly shared values blocks the way for dialogical encounters between cultures, civilizations and communities, and paves the way for a dangerous polarization between them.

Due to their irrational and emotive nature, culturalism becomes extremely influential in the street which has become a major political category in our time, especially in times of political campaigns whose dominant discourse seems to be fairly hazardous for improvement of the ongoing culture of human rights.

Culturalist narratives and arguments can easily create their counter-narratives and counter-arguments, and both, hand-in-hand, feed extremism, violence, tension and according to some, "clash of cultures" or "civilizations". I personally do not explain the present global predicament in terms of a "clash of civilization" à *la Huntington*. The main cause of the ongoing crises is mainly *political* rather than *cultural* or *religious*. That is one of the reasons why the Alliance of Civilization initiative, a UN project, of which I happened to be one of the co-chairs, insisted on *political analysis* of the current predicament and on *political recommendations* in its action-oriented report, submitted to the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in Istanbul in November 2006. According to this report, "without a full and consistent adherence to human rights standards, which is for us the foundation for stable societies and peaceful international relations, there can be no genuine dialogue between cultures or civilizations, let alone the *alliance* between them.".

My last point is about *duties, responsibilities* which have not, for a very long time, received due attentions. "Already in the debate on human rights in the French Revolutionary Parliament of 1789 the demand was made: if a declaration of the *rights* of man is proclaimed,

it must be combined with a declaration of the *responsibilities* of man.... without which the rights cannot function[1]" as we witnessed in some recent crisis such as the crises caused by the infamous caricature event which was defended by some in terms of freedom of press. I am not suggesting to drive all rights from duties and responsibilities since this is philosophically untenable. All I am saying is that to hold human society together we need *both*.

Thank you for your kind attention.

---

[1] H. Hung. A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics, SCM Press Ltd., 1997, p.*99*.