

Restoring trust – rebuilding bridges

Inaugural address, Stockholm, 21 September 2009

Delivered by Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Frank Belfrage

Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen –

It is beyond any vocabulary to describe the wealth of human resourcefulness represented by the 43 countries which together form the network of the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures.

Our joint cultural heritage forms a monumental, collective “archive” (to cite Michel Foucault¹) which serves as a constant source of inspiration: for historical research as well as for contemporary art.

The newly renovated museum where we gather today (the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities), is a case in point. Its exhibition rooms are filled with reminders of how multifarious our common legacy was already thousands of years ago... reminders of how much we actually owe one another, how indebted we have been, through the centuries, to each other’s imagination, energy and courage.

If one hallmark of our Euro Mediterranean family is the untiring quest for truth and beauty, through science and art, then another, equally proud, hallmark is the concerted effort to build a sustainable society, governed by the rule of law, with freedom and justice balancing the scales. The values underlying such a society may be derived from religious or political convictions. What unites the builders is – on one hand – respect for the continuity of fundamental principles, and – on the other hand – undogmatic openness to meaningful change.

As our Prime Minister, Mr Fredrik Reinfeldt, said in his inaugural address before the European Parliament, July 15th:

“I wish to see a Europe, humble in the face of differences, open to others’ arguments and with a strong will to find compromise...”²

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Today’s date, 21st September, may indeed be called auspicious. Since Babylonian times, it is defined as the autumnal equinox, and was a religious holiday in old Iran.

Last night, the Jewish people concluded their celebration of Rosh ha-shana, the New Year, whereas the Muslim community are in the midst of Eid al-Fitr, the Feast marking the end of Ramadan.

In the traditional Christian calendar, 21st September is consecrated to St Matthew, the Apostle and Evangelist.

¹ Michel Foucault *L’Archéologie du savoir*, 1969

² ”Och jag vill se ett Europa som är ödmjukt inför olikheter, öppna för andras argument och som har en stark vilja att finna kompromisser med det gemensamma bästa för sinnet. Ett sådant Europa står sig starkt i alla tider.” Statsminister Reinfeldts tal inför EP, Strasbourg 2009-07-15

But this day has more than religious connotations. It is, not least, the International Day of Peace.

As most of you are probably aware, the International Day of Peace was first established in 1981 by the United Nations through unanimous resolution in the General Assembly to coincide with its opening session. In 2001 the resolution was strengthened to fix the date on 21 September and for it to be a day of nonviolence and cease-fire, a day on which people around the world observe a minute of silence at 12 noon local time.

Let me to quote, briefly, from the original text:

“it would be appropriate to devote a specific time to concentrate the efforts of the United Nations and its Member States, as well as of the whole of mankind, to promoting the ideals of peace and to giving positive evidence of their commitment to peace in all viable ways” (UNGA, November 1981, A/RES/36/67)

Thus, it was felt, it would be possible to “strengthen the ideals of peace and to alleviate the tensions and causes of conflict, both within and among nations and peoples”.

Now, under the auspices of the Anna Lindh Foundation, we commemorate this year’s Peace Day in a most dignified way. For here, we have gathered peace activists from all walks of life, resourceful people of various professional backgrounds – Jews, Christians, Muslims, and secularists.

In this context, I wish to acknowledge the active partnership of the UN Alliance of Civilizations – not only in this event but in the entire package of projects and activities that have been launched under the common heading “Restoring Trust – Rebuilding Bridges”. The President of the Anna Lindh Foundation, H E Mr André Azoulay, must be considered as one of the founders of the Alliance of Civilizations.

Together with other eminent personalities, Mr Azoulay was called by the UN SG to form a High-Level Group, whose recommendations constitute the visionary basis on which the UN AoC builds and operates. It might be added, that an in-depth study written jointly by H.E. Mr. André Azoulay and H.E. Hubert Védrine on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was one of the most important inputs in this process.

The High-Level Group report addressed issues “both at the global level and at the level specific to relations between Muslim and Western societies”. Its aim was “to lay the basis and assert the moral grounds for concerted action at institutional and civil society levels to foster cross-cultural harmony and to enhance global stability.”³ To date, more than 85 UN member states have joined the Alliance of Civilizations in order to collaborate towards that noble goal.

It is also most fitting, that the seminar this morning is moderated by Dr Daniel Nord, Deputy Director at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Sipri is a truly

³ Alliance of Civilizations, Report of the High-level Group, 13 November 2006, sect. 5.19.

transnational institution, renowned for its unbiased analyses of armed conflicts and other aspects of global security. The famous SIPRI yearbook appears in several languages.

I know that the road from Alexandria to Stockholm has been arduous for all those involved, not least for the Anna Lindh Foundation as the implementing partner.

Since July 1st, local and regional actions devoted to reconciliation, culture of peace and coexistence have been implemented with the support of the Foundation. The idea has been to generate “a critical mass” and mobilize the 43 national networks and other civil society organizations simultaneously.

Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen – it is a privilege and great pleasure for me to welcome you all to Stockholm on behalf of the Swedish government and Swedish Presidency of the European Union, and to take part in the official inauguration of this seminar.

Thank you.