

**Statement by Dr. Dipu Moni, MP, the Hon'ble Foreign Minister, as Chief Guest in the Panel Discussion on "Alliance of Civilizations: Reflections on Bangladesh Perspectives", BISS, 23 May 2010**

---

**Mr. Chairman, Director General of Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Distinguished Participants, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I am happy to be amongst you here in the Panel Discussion on "Alliance of Civilizations: Reflections on Bangladesh Perspectives". I would like to thank the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) for organizing today's Panel Discussion and for inviting me to speak.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I firmly believe that the diversity in our civilizations, cultures and faiths should be a force that binds us together rather than dividing the humanity. Dialogues to build trust amongst the descendants of different civilizations and amongst the followers of different faiths and cultures are, therefore, essential.

I do not agree with those who see the present time as an episode of 'clash of civilizations'. There is, however, no denying of the fact that growing misunderstanding among various civilizations, faiths, religions and cultures has been the unfortunate hallmark of our time—thanks to certain media propaganda, particularly in the West. Such a situation not only threatens inter-civilizational, inter-cultural and inter-faith tolerance but harms the very prospect of peaceful coexistence of the human family. Proliferation of extremism, radicalization and racism has assumed a disquieting dimension. Mistrust and prejudice of the 'other' continue to persist. Newer manifestations of intolerance towards vulnerable groups such as migrant workers and immigrants are also on the rise.

The world is also witnessing an ominous trend of derision of religious symbols and beliefs as well as the abuse of religion in justifying acts of terrorism, violence and coercion. Defamation of religions, religious stereotyping, linking terrorism to certain religion and incitement of religious hatred are disrupting social harmony.

For example, Islamophobia is rearing its head with greater virulence. It is manifested from obstruction to the exercise of personal modesty, to banning minarets, to traumatizing the feelings of Muslims by satirizing its holiest of figures, and so on. We should not, however, give in to these provocations. Our efforts will be to engage with all, thoroughly, systematically, persuasively and patiently, with logical arguments and steady involvement. This is critical for creating a better understanding among the followers of different faiths, which should, in turn, would generate harmony among the peoples of the world.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The need for a dialogue between the civilizations has now emerged with a new dimension in the backdrop of fresh waves of intolerance and violence based on distorted interpretation of religion and culture. This has resulted into this initiative of Alliance of Civilizations—a stronger and more focused common platform bringing together all actors of international polity from diverse background. Launched in 2005 by the United Nations Secretary General at the initiatives of Spain and Turkey, the Alliance now has over 80 countries as members making it a convincing force in contemporary international relations.

**Distinguished participants,**

We need to achieve unity in plurality. The last two forums of the Alliance of Civilizations were successful in bringing religious leaders and statesmen as well as representatives from private and public sectors to exchange their views and to identify the challenges faced in the way of forging an Alliance of Civilizations. These two forums significantly contributed to the promotion of mutual understanding, articulation of a host of common goals and generated strong resolve among the participants to protect and promote all human civilizations. Alliance of Civilizations forums are, thus, designed to bring diverse cultures, faiths, religions or, so to speak, civilizational entities to a common platform so that they could embark upon a noble quest to form a common human civilization. I strongly believe that the forthcoming Forum will be equally successful in furthering the causes of the Alliance of Civilizations.

The challenge before us today is to transform the wealth and diversity of civilizations, cultures, religions, traditions and customs into a unifying force. I believe that all faiths, cultures and religions convey the same message of peace, justice and human solidarity. Our approach should be to work on the common denominators that unite us.

**Distinguished participants,**

All of you are aware that Bangladesh is now an inclusive, pluralistic, and multi-cultural democracy. The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees all citizens of Bangladesh the right to profess, practice or propagate his or her faith and belief, and that every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions. This is also true in case of all ethnic or other minorities. The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is mindful of its obligations to uphold the values of secularism, inclusiveness, and democracy—the values that united us during our heroic War of Liberation in 1971. The present government is committed to bring peace and prosperity for all the citizens of

Bangladesh, irrespective of their creed or faith, and to guarantee them a life of dignity.

At the international level, Bangladesh has been at the forefront of initiatives that promote greater tolerance and understanding among peoples. Bangladesh is also widely regarded as a constructive global actor in the pursuit of global peace and harmony. Bangladesh is a founding member of the Alliance of Civilizations. Millennia-old ethos of religious and cultural tolerance, pluralist traditions, long history of multi-culturalism, and particularly our Independence Movement based on secular, liberal and democratic foundation made Bangladesh a natural protagonist of the Alliance of Civilizations. Bangladesh has thus been playing a significant role in the Alliance of Civilizations forums, particularly in terms of building bridges between countries, cultures, religions and diverse civilizational entities like the West and the Muslim world.

I would also like to mention here that Bangladesh has been tabling a resolution in the UN General Assembly each year on a Culture of Peace with a desire to create a world order where amity would replace atrocity, and harmony would overcome hatred and intolerance. The history of our nation is also an important factor in our conviction for a culture of peace. We were born through a process aspiring for inclusion, and we went through a nine-month long genocidal war inflicted on us, the War of Liberation, in which we prevailed. The values of democracy, tolerance, solidarity, respect for diversity, dialogue and understanding, are, no wonder very dear to our heart.

Today, we live in a global village. This has advantages. It also brings us the reality that threats to our peace and security are interconnected. Time has proved that no nation in today's world, however mighty it may be, can guarantee peace and security of its citizens in isolation. It is imperative for us that we achieve a common understanding of old and new threats, and face those threats through a common unified front. Alliance of Civilizations can effectively contribute to creating such a level of understanding, bringing peace and security for all of us.

**Dear Participants,**

While we promote dialogue among civilizations, we do not pretend that these objectives can be achieved in a vacuum. To ensure sustainable peace, it is imperative to create the right conditions for our peoples to live in dignity, live in freedom from want and live in freedom from fear. We strongly believe that the key to our struggle against extremism and radicalization lies in addressing their root causes with a fair and objective mind. We need to acknowledge, if we were to succeed in our endeavour to promote harmony among our peoples, that many of these unfortunate trends of extremism emanated from historical injustices and repression, and hence require a political solution.

Sustainable and just peace can be achieved in the Middle East, for example, only through the resolution of the Palestinian crisis by guaranteeing the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to their statehood. A sovereign, independent and viable State of Palestine is a must to resolve this crisis, which remains at the core of all conflicts in the Middle East. Certain measures and decisions taken in the recent months in some countries banning religious symbols of the Muslims, which amount to curbing religious freedoms, are matter of grave concern for us. These are clear demonstrations of intolerance. We must respect full enjoyment of all human rights for all our peoples under all circumstances.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

Bangladesh remains an example of a country where communities, regardless of religion and ethnicity, can live in harmony. It is a country where media enjoys full freedom to express their views without fear. We have invested in education, particularly education of girls, and have been able to achieve gender parity in terms of enrolment at the primary level. The leadership of women now ranges from the top political leadership to the grass-root level. Growing empowerment of women is visible even in remote areas of the country. Our government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, is determined to pursue advancement of women in economic, cultural, social and political fields. The Alliance of Civilizations provides a forum for Bangladesh to highlight its experiences and good practices as a secular country.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I congratulate BIISS for organizing today's panel discussion on having reflections on the Bangladesh perspectives on the Alliance of Civilizations. We hope to put forward some of the outcome of today's discussion in the forthcoming Third Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations to be held in Brazil on 28—29 May 2010.

I must take this opportunity to congratulate the speakers for making very substantive presentations. The presentation made by Ambassador Ashfaqur Rahman rightly identified the challenges of the Alliance of Civilizations and explored the ways and means to overcome these. According to UNDP, 192 countries contain some 5,000 ethnic groups. Two thirds of these countries have at least one substantial minority—an ethnic or religious group that makes up at least 10% of the population. These pose challenges indeed. The presentation by Dr. Abdur Rob Khan on “Shared Responsibility of State and Non-state Actors towards Alliance of Civilizations” is very timely. We are all aware that non-state actors are increasingly playing a significant role along with States today in every sphere of life—socio-economic, politico-cultural, and so on. The time has come for non-State actors to take responsibility in terms of bridging the gap between/among peoples belonging to diverse civilizations, faiths and cultures through innovative means.

The paper by Mr. Shameem Reza has made an effort to highlight the responsibility of media in promoting the spirit of the Alliance of Civilizations. The power of media in the era of information technology could hardly be exaggerated. The challenge is how to best use this instrument to the cause of tolerance, non-violence, understanding, and sharing. Media can play a significant role, when they behave in a responsible manner, in reducing inter-cultural ignorance, dispelling negative stereotypes, and advancing alternative interpretations and perspectives. It can provide a powerful platform for constructive voices which might otherwise get ignored.

I believe today's Panel Discussion has been successful in letting the diverse ideas come into creative interactions. This has led also to some policy recommendations which would be critical in formulating government position on the issues to be discussed in the Third Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations. I congratulate, once again, the organizers, the participants and everybody involved in today's Panel Discussion.

We are happy to see that the Madrid Forum and the Istanbul forum of the Alliance had generated necessary political momentum. The Rio de Janeiro Forum provides a timely opportunity to share our thoughts, perceptions and experiences in taking forward the process. I hope that the forthcoming Alliance of Civilization meeting in Rio de Janeiro will provide us with a unique opportunity to take a leap forward for a better world—a world free from intolerance, stereotyping, fear, and injustice.

I thank you all.