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Address by
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(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the Regional Summit
on “The Development of Inter-religious and Inter-ethnic Dialogue”

Tirana, Albania, 10 November 2004

Honourable Presidents,
Honourable President of the People's Assembly of Albania,
Honourable Prime Minister,
Honourable Ministers and Representatives of Heads of State,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Being with you today on the occasion of the Regional Summit on “The Development of Inter-religious and Inter-ethnic Dialogue”, is not only an honour for me but also a source of satisfaction to the head of an organization that was set up to promote “collaboration among the nations ... in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed ... by the Charter of the United Nations”, as stated in the UNESCO Constitution.

I am grateful to President Alfred Moisiu, who took the initiative, more than a year ago, to organize this important event jointly with UNESCO. When listening to him, I immediately pledged UNESCO's full support for his proposal. Apart from the generosity and the idealistic motivation of the offer to host this meeting in Albania, it appeared to me as the right initiative, the right place and the right time. But, above all, I felt that it had the potential to convey a significant and powerful message.

Throughout its long history, which many historians trace back to the Illyrians and even beyond, Albania has been shaped by the cultural traditions and influences of the Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Venetian and Ottoman periods, while its lands were claimed wholly or in part by virtually each of its neighbours as part of their historical territories. During all these centuries, the Albanian people remained where they were, patiently keeping alive their language and traditions as their most important heritage, which conveyed a sense of their proud identity to all invaders, occupants and foreign rulers.

When the modern Albanian state came into being in 1912, its population was made up of Muslims and Orthodox and Catholic Christians; the silent stone monuments that were spread all over its territory bore eloquent witness to rich and diversified cultural traditions.

Let me close this short historical digression by concluding that I consider our gathering here today as not merely coincidental or inspired by an ephemeral political convenience, but as the result of political determination and historical consciousness.

President Moisiu, you and your country are to be commended for both.

The presence of several Heads of State and Government from the region and beyond as well as many Government representatives is a clear sign that the theme of this Regional Summit attracts interest at the highest level. It also testifies to the broad-based political commitment to constructive dialogue among countries, among peoples and ethnic groups and among religious leaders. The felt need for dialogue is growing in this region and advantage should be taken of this promising opportunity.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In recent years, UNESCO has made a determined effort to respond to a United Nations initiative that is timely, relevant and innovative. I refer, of course, to the proclamation of the year 2001 as the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations and the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the “Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations”, on 21 November 2001.

Both the UN International Year and the Global Agenda conferred considerable responsibilities – and expectations - on UNESCO, focusing on the ethical and intellectual dimensions of its mandate. In the immediate aftermath of 11 September 2001, the UNESCO General Conference unanimously adopted a far-reaching resolution on the fight against terrorism, placing strong emphasis on the role of the dialogue among cultures and civilizations. A series of global, regional and sub-regional conferences ensued, organized by UNESCO, which culminated in a resolution by UNESCO’s General Conference in 2003 on the Organization’s activities regarding the dialogue among civilizations.

UNESCO has sought to fulfil its lead role in respect to the dialogue vigorously and creatively. In particular, we have focused on promoting dialogue and related activities at regional and sub-regional levels. This is again the case at this summit event in Tirana and, as Director-General of UNESCO, I am truly pleased by this evolution.

The precursor to today’s Tirana summit was the Regional Summit Forum on Dialogue among Civilizations, held in Ohrid in The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in August 2003. It is significant indeed that several of the Heads of State present here today also participated in the Ohrid event. The Ohrid Forum was unquestionably an epochal event, which succeeded in defining concrete action in the fields of education, culture and science. Action in these domains is essential for a deepening of mutual understanding and a strengthening of commonly shared values such as tolerance, through the medium of the dialogue.

Recalling Ohrid also means paying tribute to President Boris Trajkovski, who so tragically passed away earlier this year. A man of vision, commitment, courage and

action, he made a seminal contribution to inter-cultural and inter-state dialogue as well as to the strengthening of peace in the region, anchored in a re-building of mutual trust among its leaders. Meeting in Tirana, we salute him and his legacy, while welcoming most warmly in our midst his distinguished successor, President Branko Crvenkovski. When serving as Prime Minister of his country, he was intimately involved in the preparations and conduct of the Ohrid summit. This first-hand knowledge and exposure augur well for a continuation of the dialogue process set in motion in Ohrid. Indeed, the desire for a more peaceful future unites us all here – and serves as inspiration for designing initiatives and practical action in the South-East Europe region – and beyond.

The Ohrid experience provided impetus to other regional dialogue processes, such as in the Arab world (where UNESCO sponsored a colloquium on the Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations in Sana'a, Yemen, in February 2004) and in the Eurasia region (where an International Conference on “Eurasia in the 21st Century – Dialogue of Cultures or Conflict of Civilizations?” was held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in June 2004).

In all regional activities, UNESCO has underlined one key point: what matters most is not the fact of holding a Summit, conference or colloquium in itself, nor is it only the joint agreement on a final text or declaration at a given moment. Rather, in the final analysis, what counts are the concrete action and practical follow-up arising as a result of dialogue and agreements reached. It is against our capacity to implement the dialogue in the real world – and in the real life of the region - that our success must be measured.

The main objective of the Tirana Summit is to pay special attention to the role of inter-religious and multi-ethnic dialogue in building and reinforcing stability and progress in the South East-Europe region, drawing also on conclusions from Ohrid.

The main underlying vision that unites us today was clearly spelled out in key passages of the “Message from Ohrid”. It stated, in particular, that “Mutual respect of traditions and people will be possible when the matrix of values and the underlying spiritual and ethical foundations can influence education systems in different societies”. Undoubtedly, religious beliefs and practices as well as ethnic values and traditions have a fundamental influence and impact on education systems and their quality, including curricula.

Everywhere, inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue represents a significant feature of social cohesion and stability. In South-East Europe, such dialogue carries particular importance both historically and in current political contexts, drawing as it does on deep-rooted moral, ethical and spiritual values. They have affected the formation of societies and formed the peoples inhabiting them.

Over centuries, the countries of the South-East Europe region have gone through military, economic, and political crises, conflicts and even war. The most recent tragedies of the 1990s are still vivid in our memory – and they motivate, if not compel, us to take all possible action to prevent a recurrence. Internal and external shocks have dislocated neighbours, ethnic groups and religious communities who before have lived together in peace. In the process, ethnic cleansing, flows of refugees, trade and commercial disruptions and economic decline in a once prosperous region damaged the social fabric of the region. However, building on the progress of the last few years, especially the resumption of economic growth and social development, the strengthening of democratic institutions and the emergence of effective governance mechanisms, South-East Europe is clearly rebounding. “Never again” should be the motto in this region, too. Leaders in all walks of life – and here especially in communities bridging religious and ethnic differences – have a special responsibility in that regard. Clearly, the experience of the past years offers hope, as we have learned about the power of faith- and people-based contacts and initiatives.

The presence among us of the Grand Mufti of Bosnia underlines the power of interfaith dialogue, tolerance and peace in that regard. I am pleased to note that, for his role and contribution, the Grand Mufti recently received the 2003 Felix Houphouët-Boigny Prize, awarded by UNESCO, together with Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, President Emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Likewise, the experience of Albania, our host country, is most encouraging indeed, benefiting from peaceful engagement and cooperation among people adhering to different religious groups and faiths under one societal roof.

For all countries, the capacity and willingness to generate – and sustain – dialogue across ethnic and religious boundaries are decisive for advancing further on the road to peace, democracy, stability and sustainable development.

Religion is of profound importance to people’s identities, but religious differences should never be seen as insurmountable. There exists an underlying thread of unity connecting the great religious traditions. They each propound basic spiritual truths and standards of behaviour that constitute the very basis of social cohesion and collective purpose. The religions, therefore, should be able to dialogue in an effort that honours their deepest truths and holds promise for humanity.

This is no small challenge; there is much to do. UNESCO’s Member States have requested me to identify practical steps that could be taken or initiated by the Organization to bring about concrete changes through dialogue-related action in our domains – education, the sciences, culture, and communication and information. Those measures include work with youth and women as well as the mobilization and

involvement of civil society, ethnic and faith-based organizations. Invariably, this involves intensive networking.

One thing is abundantly clear. We must all place the dialogue at the core of educational efforts, in particular the pursuit of the six Education for All (EFA) goals and the promotion of quality education at all levels. Putting the notion of “learning to live together” throughout life into effect requires that we engage with the renewal of curricula, the improvement of educational materials and the enhancement of teaching/learning processes, focusing on peace, tolerance, mutual understanding and multilingual education.

In this context, let me give an example. I am pleased to note that the first phase of the joint UNESCO-Ministry of Education project to promote “Human Rights and Intercultural Education in Albania” has attained its objectives and that the Government of Italy has already approved the funds for a second phase. The project is focused on the integration of human rights and democracy education in the school curriculum; the implementation of the national in-service training curriculum for human rights education; and the large-scale training of teachers.

Advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) also create the conditions for an extension of dialogue practices. These technologies have the potential of bringing together diverse communities, cultures and civilizations – including different faiths – in different modes. The digital divide is not only an impediment to development as a whole; it also constitutes a barrier to intercultural exchange. We must capitalize on ICTs and their innate potential to advance freedom of expression and cultural diversity. The promotion of inter-ethnic understanding and harmony is an essential part of sustaining cultural diversity.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 in Johannesburg acknowledged that cultural diversity is inseparable from economic, social and ecological concerns, echoing the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) which defines it as “one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence” (Article 3).

This idea also found expression when the restored Old Bridge at Mostar was opened on 23 July this year. The Mostar Declaration recalled the Message from Ohrid and the necessity of “associating cultural heritage with development policies and demonstrating how much this powerful symbol of a people’s identity can become a unifying factor for national and regional reconciliation”.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

The challenges confronting us are manifold and we should seize the opportunity to promote effective dialogue.

As we do so, we should bear carefully in mind that all faiths convey a message of peace, justice and human solidarity and that religious leaders, like all other community leaders, have the potential to exercise a positive influence on how people in society understand each other and interact. Reconciliation of religious views is an increasingly significant challenge of our age. This also entails the need to create more awareness among peoples and government authorities about the need to respect the diversity of cultures, in particular with regard to the use of religious symbols, images and expressions.

We also know that ignorance and mistrust of the “other” can lead to extremist attitudes, ranging from entrenched and exclusive identities to the rejection of the “other” and even to open fanaticism based on the idea that one’s own religious beliefs embody the sole truth.

All these considerations lead us to examine during this Summit:

- The South-East European experience of inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations;
- The need to raise public awareness of the positive impact of ethnic and religious co-existence, understanding and harmony;
- The promotion of inter-ethnic dialogue among the peoples in South-East Europe as a tool to further mutual understanding and resolve existing problems;
- Efforts to counter intolerance, discrimination and extremism, which are destabilizing factors as far as peace, security and stability in the region are concerned.

The Tirana Summit is a most timely occasion to focus on how religion and multi-ethnicity can contribute positively to a dialogue among civilizations and cultures. As I suggested at the outset, this can only further stability and progress in the region as a whole, which not only shares common challenges but also has to cope with their cross-border dimensions. Regional co-operation, therefore, must go hand-in-hand with further development within individual countries.

In conclusion, let me assure you that UNESCO stands ready to sustain the regional dialogue in progress in South-East Europe. In this regard, I am looking forward to participating in the forthcoming Regional Forum on Cultural Corridors which is being hosted by one of today's eminent participants, President Parvanov of Bulgaria, in Varna on 20-21 May 2005. I look forward to seeing you all again on that occasion, when we shall be seeking to highlight the importance of understanding the region's shared cultural past as a way of rebuilding trust and mapping out together the path to the future.

I wish you much success in your deliberations.

Thank you.