

**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**

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**MESSAGE TO THE CONFERENCE ON “WHO SPEAKS FOR ISLAM?
WHO SPEAKS FOR THE WEST?”
Kuala Lumpur, 10-11 February 2006**

*Delivered by S. Iqbal Riza
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I am delighted to send my warmest wishes to this international conference on Islam and the West.

We all are aware that this is a time of sharply increasing intolerance, extremism and violence, which have strained relations alarmingly between the Western and Muslim worlds. They have exacerbated misconceptions about each other held by people of Islamic and Judeo-Christian or secular traditions. There is a danger that the essential dialogue between cultures and societies is being reduced to an angry exchange between the fringes, with each side assuming that extremists speak for the other side as a whole and – in turn – allowing its own extremists to frame its own hostile response.

The extremist’s tendency to divide humanity into mutually exclusive groups or categories, and to treat anyone who tries to cross the dividing lines as a traitor, is one of the greatest threats that we face in the world today. Muslims have perhaps suffered most from this tendency, but they have not suffered alone. Extremist slogans have gained ground in East and West, inciting misperceptions and threatening peace and security all over the world.

The truth is that no one voice can claim to represent an entire faith or a whole civilization. Nor can any one individual, any single organization or any particular government claim to speak for either the Muslim world or the Western world. Instead, it is up to each of us to speak for ourselves and for our values.

That is why the question your conference asks is so timely, and so pertinent. It is time for the voices of understanding and acceptance of diversity to show their strength. It is time for every one of us to speak up, rather than let others speak for us, or to assume that the menacing voices of extremists are empowered or mandated to speak for their societies.

And yet the question of who speaks for each of us in this dialogue begs another, equally important question - to whom do we choose to listen? Surely the hallmark of any genuine dialogue is not only the respectful and constructive tone of the discourse, but also the manner in which that discourse is received by others.

We can not insist on the civility of discourse unless we give serious attention to what is said. History teaches us that grievances expressed peacefully, and yet ignored, will eventually manifest themselves in ever more forceful and violent ways.

And so as we ask who speaks for the West and who speaks for Islam, we must also ask whether we are listening. A more civil discourse that fails to resolve long-standing grievances will ultimately lose the support of the most aggrieved among us and cause many to call into question the usefulness of civility itself. This is a sure path to increased rancour and renewed violence.

Our shared challenge is therefore twofold: First, we must embolden the voices of tolerance and understanding engaged in this dialogue. Second, we must foster a greater receptivity and will to act on what those voices say to us.

Your gathering seems well qualified to embark on such a dialogue. Your diverse backgrounds and experiences should enable you to make an important contribution to the “Alliance of Civilizations”, which I launched last year at the initiative of the Spanish and Turkish prime ministers. This initiative is intended to respond to the need for a committed effort by the international community—in both its intergovernmental and its civil society forms—to bridge divides and overcome prejudices, misconceptions, and polarizations which potentially threaten world peace. Meetings such as yours will be essential for its ultimate success, **a goal made all the more urgent by recent alarming events.**

Kofi A. Annan