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A CALL FOR RESPECT AND CALM

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With growing concern, we are witnessing the escalation in disturbing tensions provoked by the publication, in European newspapers, of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad that Muslims consider deeply offensive. We shall all be the losers if we fail to immediately defuse this situation, which can only leave a trail of mistrust and misunderstanding between both sides in its wake. Therefore, it is necessary to make an appeal for respect and calm, and let the voice of reason be heard.

Last year, when the heads of government of Turkey and Spain presided over the launching of work on the Alliance of Civilizations Project, we did so based on a firm belief: that we needed initiatives and instruments to stop the spiral of hatred and obfuscation that, in itself, constitutes a threat to international peace and security.

The unfortunate events that we are seeing now only reaffirm our diagnosis and our commitment to seek even more support for this cause.

Historically, Spain and Turkey have been at crossroads between East and West. Therefore, we are very aware that the way in which close contact between different cultures is handled can be enormously enriching, but it can also set off destructive contentions.

In a globalized world, in which the relationships and exchanges among different civilizations continue to multiply, and in which a local incident may have worldwide repercussions, it is vital that we cultivate the values of respect, tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

Freedom of expression is one of the cornerstones of our democratic systems and we shall never relinquish it. But there are no rights without responsibility and respect for different sensibilities. The publication of these caricatures may be perfectly legal, but it is not indifferent and thus ought to be rejected from a moral and political standpoint.

In the end, all of this lends itself to misunderstandings and misrepresentations of cultural differences that are perfectly in harmony with our commonly shared values. Ignoring this fact usually paves the way for mistrust, alienation and anger, all of which may result in undesirable consequences that we all have to work hard to avoid.

The only way for us to build a more just international system is through maximum respect for the beliefs of both sides. We are fully committed to observing the norms of international law and to the defense of the international organizations that embody it. But neither laws nor institutions are enough to ensure peace in the world.

We need to cultivate peaceful coexistence, which is only possible when there is interest in understanding the other side's point of view, and respect for that which it holds most sacred. These are the basic premises and main goals of the Alliance of Civilizations promoted by Spain and Turkey.

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