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Address by  
Mr Koïchiro Matsuura

Director-General  
of the United Nations Educational,  
Scientific and Cultural Organization  
(UNESCO)

at the Working Dinner on Dialogue Among Civilizations  
at the UNEP Global Ministerial Environment Forum

*“The Environmental Dimension of Dialogue Among Civilizations”*

Nairobi, 8 February, 2001

Your Excellency, the Vice-President of Iran,  
Dr. Töpfer, my dear colleague and Executive Director of UNEP,  
Mr Soyinka,  
Honourable Ministers,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

2001 was proclaimed “United Nations Year for Dialogue among Civilizations” in a 1998 resolution sponsored by, amongst others, the Islamic Republic of Iran. The resolution invites the United Nations system to plan and implement appropriate programmes to promote the concept of dialogue among civilizations. While UNESCO is not *the* lead agency for this year, I have incorporated fully the Dialogue among Civilizations in UNESCO’s Programme for 2002 - 2003. This is why I welcome and thank my dear friend and colleague, the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, for his kind invitation to be present at UNEP’s 21<sup>st</sup> Global Ministerial Environment Forum. I am also encouraged that you have decided to convene special events, like this working dinner, to celebrate this United Nations Year for the Dialogue among Civilizations.

I would like to describe what I believe to be the main thrust of this concept for UNESCO, which puts dialogue among civilizations at the heart of its constitution.

The idea is not a new one. In fact, as Resolution 53/22 states: “*mutually beneficial interaction among civilizations has continued throughout human history despite impediments arising from intolerance, disputes and wars*”. It also mentions that dialogue has been seen as a means to reach understanding, remove threats to peace and strengthen interaction and exchange among civilizations. This is echoed in UNESCO’s Constitution which states that through “collaboration among the nations” and through “advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples” we can “build peace in the minds of men ...”. You can see, therefore, that from its beginnings, UNESCO has been responsible for promoting dialogue among civilizations.

Dialogue, in today’s world, is indeed increasingly relevant and acute. It implies a recognition of diversity and respect for the essential contribution and equal dignity of all cultures and human beings. We must all learn to recognize that each culture owes a debt to all other cultures. I am convinced that globalization itself will thrive on dialogue, interaction and exchange. Dialogue at all levels is especially crucial in an age of globalization. We have come to recognize that we are in a situation of increasing interdependence. Our future is intrinsically linked to the preservation of all those global natural systems that support life, and, indeed, to the survival of all forms of life.

I should like to share some thoughts with you on the environmental dimensions of the Dialogue among Civilizations. For UNESCO Man and his environment are indissociable. It is no coincidence that culture and the environmental sciences should cohabit within our Organization. Rather, the structure of UNESCO reflects a deep conviction that culture and environment are interrelated, and that this interaction benefits society.

Through the ages, civilizations have chosen one of two approaches to Nature: either they have sought to dominate their natural environment, or to dialogue with it. The religious and cultural specificity of each civilization has been shaped by its relation with Nature. The discovery of other environments and other interpretations of Nature through nomadism, trade and even war has inspired civilizations to re-examine and transform their own environment and their perception of the world.

From an observation of the natural world through the ages, we have discovered that the survival and development of one species is dependent upon the survival and development of the others. In understanding the importance of unity and diversity, civilizations have come to recognize that interaction between different groups is not only necessary but mutually enriching.

Once we understand the value of plurality, we are capable of adopting an intercultural approach to environment that takes into account the different perceptions of creation that societies have constructed over time.

I agree with you whole-heartedly, Dr Töpfer, when you say that “*the environmental dimension of the concept of peace and security cannot be ignored any more.*” This is why I have placed such importance on the Dialogue among Civilizations, not only for the year 2001, but also within our Medium-Term Strategy, which we are currently elaborating.

The following are some priority objectives I have set for UNESCO: improving human security by better management of the environment and social change; protecting cultural diversity and encouraging pluralism and dialogue between cultures and civilizations; preserving the oral and intangible heritage, and living cultures, traditions and linguistic diversity; promoting principles and ethical norms to guide scientific and technological development and social transformations.

UNEP stated in its recent report, Global Environment Outlook “*the cultural and spiritual values of biodiversity have demonstrated that sustainable development and the richness of cultures are interdependent.*” The Iron Roads,

the Routes of Al-Andalus and the Slave Routes are UNESCO programmes that demonstrate this quite clearly. No one person nor any single culture can develop without the interactivity of other people and cultures. We must learn to recognize what each culture owes to all other cultures. We ought to realize that cultural tourism could also be one of the most fertile and challenging means through which the dialogue between cultures and civilizations might be expressed. To meet others also helps to appreciate one's own culture and heritage, and understand one's own natural environment.

Cultural tourism is a kind of informal education in itself. Education both informal and formal, is essential for peaceful international relations and sustainable development. To address today's ongoing challenges and problems - poverty, illiteracy, hunger, diseases, environmental degradation and erosion of cultural diversity - requires active and knowledgeable citizens and informed political and economic decision-makers, capable of making the right choices when confronted with complex interrelated economic, social and environmental decisions. Education for sustainable development becomes the essential tool to this end. I am committed to enhancing further UNESCO's efforts in education in the interrelated fields of education for peace and sustainable development.

The World Heritage Convention is making an exceptional contribution to the protection of the planet's cultural and natural diversity. The need to reinforce these efforts becomes all the more urgent in a context of globalization and world-wide environmental change. UNESCO therefore takes a multidisciplinary approach towards conservation of both cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value.

The World Conference on Science, which UNESCO organized in Budapest in 1999, also stressed the need to preserve, protect, research and promote the cultural heritage found in traditional, unwritten local knowledge systems. These age-old systems may be empirical and transmitted by word of mouth, but they are nevertheless dynamic expressions of perceiving and understanding the world, and valuable contributions to science and technology. The Conference made a series of recommendations in this respect which I intend to apply through our various scientific programmes.

For its part, UNESCO's **Inter-Governmental Oceanographic Commission** currently implements the Global Ocean Observing System (GOOS). In collaboration with many world-wide partners, GOOS has both an open ocean subsystem to improve weather and climate forecasting as well as a coastal one to provide information needed to manage and restore healthy coastal ecosystems and living resources.

Promotion of transboundary biosphere reserves within UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme will be pursued as a means to enhance peace and the joint management of ecosystems.

UNESCO is also the focal point for the United Nations World Water Assessment Programme, and we intend to increase scientific dialogue among countries sharing water resources. Such dialogue, again, heavily depends upon mutual understanding between different cultures.

By way of conclusion, I should like to emphasize that dialogue among civilizations implies a true sense of responsibility among us, agencies of the United Nations system, in terms of cooperation. I look forward to discussing these vital issues in further detail over the next few days, and to exploring how UNEP and UNESCO could collaborate even more fruitfully in the future.

Thank you very much.