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Statement by H.E. Mr. Agshin MEHDIYEV
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Republic of Azerbaijan to the United Nations
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Mr. President,

At the outset, allow me to express my Government's gratitude and sincere thanks to His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the initiative to hold a high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the culture of peace. This meeting indeed offers a timely opportunity to exchange views and ideas as to the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, tolerance, mutual understanding and cooperation.

Mr. President,

Geographically located at the crossroads of the West and East, Azerbaijan has embraced various elements of both cultures and civilizations. Indeed, in my country, where various faiths and religious trends were propagated throughout the history, relations of tolerance were established and prevailed between different communities.

As from the second half of XIX century the capital of Azerbaijan, Baku, became the petroleum center of the region and beyond, while the country amazed the mixture of languages, religions and cultural traditions. In 1918, Azerbaijan established the first ever democratic Republic in the East with multi-party parliament and coalition government. During the years of communist rule in Azerbaijan, which mercilessly fought against religion, remarkable religious centers were destroyed and the spiritual values and traditions were subjected to systematic desecration and oppression. Ever since Azerbaijan restored its independence equality before the law and the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief were effectively guaranteed by the State, while many mosques, churches and synagogues were constructed and rehabilitated in the country.

Nowadays Azerbaijan shares the European values and is an inalienable component of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. At the same time, Azerbaijan, as part of the Muslim world, shares the progressive heritage and spiritual values of the Islamic culture and civilization. Such an advantage gives us an ample opportunity to contribute to the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue and understanding, encourage ethnic and religious diversity and develop inter-communal links.

Against this background, Azerbaijan has repeatedly expressed its determination to act as a natural bridge consolidating different continents, cultures and civilizations, establishing the necessary prerequisites for the promotion of inter-religious and intercultural dialogue.

Thus, being convinced of the crucial role which media plays in shaping the public opinion, in April 2007 Azerbaijan hosted the international conference on the role of media in the development of tolerance and mutual understanding. As an active member of the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations, Azerbaijan convened in November 2007, with the support of the UNDP, Council of Europe and ISESCO, a high-level conference in the framework of “Youth for Alliance of Civilizations” initiative. Another important international gathering took place in my country this June and was dedicated to the role of women in cross-cultural dialogue.

We look forward to continue contributing to peace and mutual understanding through the promotion of a dialogue among civilizations and cultures, including by means of holding high-profile, action-oriented events which would bring together political leaders, governments, international organizations, civil society groups, religious communities, and media.

Thus, Azerbaijan will host this December the Council of Europe Ministers of Culture conference on intercultural dialogue as a basis for peace and sustainable development in Europe and its neighboring regions. Furthermore, Baku is being prepared to become “the capital of Islamic Culture for 2009”.

Mr. President,

Today, we are living at a time of heightened religious awareness, which in certain instances takes on exaggerated forms and sometimes is maliciously exploited to fuel conflicts on ethnic, religious or cultural grounds. In recent years, unacceptable attacks against Islam in some countries confirm vital necessity of joint efforts and dialogue to counter such defamatory manifestations and misconceptions.

We fully support the recommendations of the Secretary-General on the importance of increasing educational efforts to remove hate messages, distortions, prejudice, and negative bias from textbooks and other educational media, and ensuring the basic knowledge and understanding of the world's main cultures, civilizations and religions.

Mr. President,

Against the background of principled approach of Azerbaijan to safeguarding its unity, diversity, cultural heritage and spiritual values, there is another experience in our immediate neighbourhood based upon the regrettable policy of ethnic and religious incompatibility. Thus, the practical realization of this policy resulted in destructive aggression against Azerbaijan, occupation and ethnic cleansing of its territories. As a consequence, Azerbaijan is suffering, *inter alia*, from excessive cultural disaster, that is, numerous historical, cultural, religious monuments and pieces of arts have been destroyed and plundered in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. Therefore, the United Nations General Assembly's consideration of the agenda item entitled "The situation in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan" plays an important role in attracting attention of Member States to the illegal practices in the occupied territories and initiating urgent measures for putting them to an end.

Mr. President,

In conclusion, I express the hope that this meeting will make a valuable contribution to overcoming the stereotypes and misconceptions, diminishing hostility and promoting dialogue, understanding and mutual respect among peoples of different cultural and religious traditions. I am confident that that the tangible results of this meeting will be a source of inspiration for all of us in our efforts to find creative solutions to the problems we are facing.

I thank you.