The Alliance of Civilizations is a proposal to prevent a wall of hate and incomprehension between the West and the Arab and Muslim worlds. It wants to help end the causes which lie behind Islamic terrorism. This initiative was put forward by Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero of Spain.

Since the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, which caused death, injury and loss to innocent people, radical Islamists have perpetrated terrorist attacks, which have ended the lives of both men and women from countries in the five continents. It is within this new international context and due to a surge of insecurity that the Spanish Prime Minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, proposed before the 59th Session of the United Nations General Assembly the initiative known as the Alliance of Civilizations (September 21, 2004). In his speech, he made clear that ‘terrorism has no justification … but its roots can and should be known; it is possible to do so and one should think rationally as to how it occurs and how it grows, in order to combat it rationally.’ He also added that terror should be fought within national and international law regarding Human Rights and the United Nations.

The aim of the initiative is for all the citizens of the world to unite in placing their universal citizenship before their condition as citizens of a country, religion or civilization. The Alliance of Civilizations has received support from more than 30 countries, including the Iberian American Community of Nations which, from a proposal of Argentina, carried out a Special Communication at their San José Summit (Costa Rica, autumn 2004). It also received the support of Arab League countries, to which the Spanish Prime Minister addressed himself at the Algerian Summit on March 22, 2005, when this organization was celebrating its 60th anniversary. The Alliance has also received the support of several European Union countries, including Germany, France and the UK.

Turkey, a country in which Muslims, secular people, and those of other creeds co-exist and which has numerous political and complex alliances, decided to co-sponsor the initiative through its Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan and Rodríguez Zapatero requested the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, to designate a High Level Group to channel the proposal. Kofi Annan took on the initiative and also called on the international community to join the project on July 14, 2005. The High Level Group will develop a report with recommendations for carrying out this alliance between peoples and nations and for designing a plan of action, to be presented in Madrid at the end of 2006. Spain and Turkey announced that they would keep on co-sponsoring the initiative.
In September 2005, Kofi Annan established the High Level Group, which was co-chaired by Federico Mayor Zaragoza (UNESCO Director General, 1987–99) and Mehmet Aydyn, Turkish minister in charge of religious affairs. The High Level Group includes prominent figures such as former Iranian President Mohamed Jatami, Nobel Laureate Desmond Tutu, Alenjandia’s Library Director Ismael Serage, former Indonesian Foreign Secretary Ali Alatas, and ‘Mrs Mozah Bint Nasser Abdullah al Missned of Quatar and Enrique Iglesias, Secretary-General of the Ibero-American summits and former Inter-American Development Bank President, among others.

The Alliance of Civilizations not only aspires to be a framework to end the causes of terrorism, but also aims to be a bridge between cultures, helping to create a climate of tolerance, understanding, comprehension and dialogue in the context of democracy and respect for Human Rights. It aims to help overcome the present threat to world peace represented by terrorism that targets innocent, ordinary people.

Some observers and analysts, however, have not given much importance to this initiative, which has been termed as well intentioned, but not very feasible. Others ignore it completely because it has no concrete action plan yet and or because both the participation of the Spanish President and the call from Kofi Annan were not enough to get a large hearing in the mainstream media. Constructing peace requires great efforts that often go largely unnoticed in many societies and their media. However, an example that dialogue is possible between the West and the Arab and Muslim worlds can be found in the Process of Barcelona, which turned 10 years in 2005, and which gathers the Heads of State and Government from both banks of the Mediterranean and whose continued dialogue process has been praised by all, ensuring peace and co-existence.

Certainly, the Alliance of Civilizations will be an initiative that will not have an easy existence and success, but its great value lays in the ideas that sustain it. On one side, it recognizes that the world is made up of different cultures and civilizations and that humanity should be committed to their co-existence, advocating peace and world security, which are essential and core elements of the United Nations. On the other, it makes no concessions to terrorism, which it considers is unjustifiable. It is important to keep in mind that this initiative has arisen from Spain, which has suffered from terrorism for thirty years.

The question in this GUNI Report is whether universities can contribute to the Alliance of Civilizations’ objectives. Society has traditionally entrusted universities with resolving its great problems as well as the realization of opportunities through state-of-the-art research, as well as through the education of future generations. It may be true that sometimes universities have not given the most adequate answers or have not risen to expectations. However, they are the best prepared and equipped of all social institutions to do so. The majority of the great (and also small) discoveries, inventions and innovations have been carried out in universities and have contributed in a positive manner to improving the well-being of people, expanding life expectancy for example. Universities also train the leaders of society, so universities have a lot to say and contribute in a project that promotes co-existence of civilizations.

Higher education should be understood as a quality public service, which ensures access by merit and has a strong social commitment. In the world we live in, it is no longer viable to look upon the universities as ‘ivory towers’, because society no longer accepts it. The ‘ivory tower’ model also betrays the original mission and reason of university. University activities should now be pertinent to their social context. Besides, universities are coming under increasing pressure to be accountable for their actions, not only because they use financial resources but also because society questions the reasons that lie behind teaching programmes or why universities advance along specific lines of research.

Universities are fundamentally dedicated to creating new knowledge through theoretical and applied research and to spread this knowledge by means of teaching to new generations of citizens, and not just for a degree, for now they also offer education throughout the students’ whole lifetime. University education is not just a stage in the lives of people who gain access to it, in which they acquire knowledge, techniques and skills, society also expects universities to educate their future leaders in values. Often these values are embedded in implicit form in knowledge, techniques and skills we teach our future generations. Sometimes, values are completely explicit in some universities and careers. It is for this very reason that from understanding cultures and civilizations universities can help make the world a better place.

The challenge of world peace and the mutual understanding and interdependence of civilizations is gigantic, but universities have repeatedly helped societies assume gigantic challenges in the past, such as ending diseases that decimated entire populations. Our own evolution as civilizations implies that universities have repeatedly faced up to new challenges every day. Universities had to be flexible and adapt themselves to new challenges constantly. Just thirty years ago there were no environment or sustainable development studies. Today, many universities offer them at a graduate or postgraduate level. They have even mainstreamed it in subjects such as engineering, architecture, and so on. Is it not possible to mainstream something so fundamental to improving the well-being of Humanity as coexistence?

The picture of higher education in the world is very diverse, but now more than 110 million people are studying in thousands of higher education institutions. The expansion of enrolment is growing fast and larger sections of society have access to higher education, especially in
developing countries. This means that larger segments of the population can be educated in values at university level. European countries, for example, are building a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) known as the Bologna Process aimed at ensuring an accreditation of degrees and the free circulation of students and faculty with the aim of increasing enrolment even further. In the context of revision of study plans in EHEA countries, we should not lose the opportunity to invest in values, so that new generations can make the co-existence of civilizations a reality.

On the issue of the Alliance of Civilizations, universities should, again, be ahead of their time, with the instruments that they have always had: the capacity to generate new knowledge that helps understand life and how to advance in it, to disseminate such knowledge, so that it can be used by society. Universities must ensure that society does not forget the values that are required for the construction of a new, more harmonious, sustainable and peaceful world.

NOTE

1 Sources: speeches given by the Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero before the 59th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, and before the Summit meeting of the League of Arab Nations; the article by Mármo Cajal (2005) ‘Alliance of Civilizations’ in El País, July 4, 2005; and other news briefs which have appeared in Spanish newspapers El País and La Vanguardia.

SPECIAL COLLABORATION I.2
UNIVERSITY FINANCING AND POLITICAL DECENTRALIZATION IN SPAIN

BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE UNIVERSITY AND THE SPANISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

Spanish universities have undergone significant changes in the past thirty years. Such changes have had a close relationship with the political, social and economic transformation undergone by the state since the establishment of parliamentary democracy, Spain’s integration into the European Union and the development of a welfare state.

The Spanish state is divided into autonomous regions (the Autonomous Communities), which have the authority to make political and administrative decisions in certain areas, such as education, health, environment, culture, social services, regional organization, and so on, similarly to the federal states that make up a federation. There are 17 autonomous regions in Spain, with historical roots and national identity of their own, such as Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia and also other regions such as Castile, Murcia, Extremadura, Madrid and so on (Statutes of Autonomy).

Each autonomous region has its own constitution providing basic institutional regulation through which political competences and faculties are specified. This also regulates the relationship between the autonomous region and the central state within the framework of the Spanish Constitution. Under the framework of the attributed political competences, an autonomous region’s political action is the responsibility of its own government, this being regulated by a parliament elected by the region’s citizens.

The Spanish Constitution of 1978 confirmed freedom of teaching and autonomy of universities as fundamental rights. Likewise, there are obvious historical influences included under the area of university organization, among which the following should be mentioned:

- Higher education consists mainly of university institutions: ‘higher education’ being a basically equivalent term to ‘university education’.
- Napoleonic model or state-based control: faculty has largely civil servant status, and central entities for the whole state.
- Public universities that are financed by autonomous regions, having little assistance from private institutions.
- Public universities with 85 per cent of the university costs covered by governments’ subsidies.
- Little development of grants and scholarship system.
- The amount allocated for higher education relevant to GDP is within the European average.

Within the university sector, autonomous regions have responsibility for the creation of public universities and identification and recognition of private ones; planning and coordinating supply of university courses; financing the system of public higher education; scientific and technological policies, and so on. However, the issuing and standardizing of professional and academic degrees is carried out by the central state, in addition to basic faculty legal regulations, faculty generally enjoying civil servant status, and general coordination and promotion of scientific and technical research.

In terms of the aforementioned changes undergone by universities in recent years, the main issues to be considered can be summarized as follows:

- High access rate to higher education (mass universities): currently, over 40 per cent of the age bracket enters university.
- Increase in the number of institutions: