

U.N. seeks talks to avert religious clash

By Thalif Deen

NEW YORK (IPS)-The United Nations has unanimously rejected the controversial hypothesis that a "clash of civilizations"-between Christianity and Islam or between East and West-is inevitable.

The longstanding debate has been re-ignited by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, viewed by some as the potential beginnings of a battle between Islam and the Western world.

Even if there were such a clash, says the 189-member General Assembly, the only answer is a meaningful dialogue among member states and civil society.

"If ever one doubted the need for a dialogue among civilizations, let them doubt no longer," says U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The attacks on the United States, he argues, "made the need for such a dialogue crystal clear." The General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution calling for "a global agenda for a dialogue among civilizations" that is both preventive of conflicts and inclusive in nature.

"Dialogue among civilizations is a useful concept," contends Annan. "It is an appropriate and necessary answer to the notion of an inevitable clash of civilizations."

He adds that governments and non-governmental organizations in several countries-including Austria, Costa Rica, Egypt, Mali, and South Korea-have joined U.N. agencies in advancing this dialogue.

"With this dialogue, taking place in every part of the world, appeals to war will be met with appeals to compro-

mise.

Hatred will be met with tolerance, violence with resolve," he says. Proponents of such dialogue have their work cut out for them, however.

Responding to the terrorist attacks, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi publicly declared Western civilization is superior to that of the Islamic world, said to be the birthplace not only of the Sept. 11 attackers but also of their ideology and mission.

"We should be confident of the superiority of our civilization, which consists of a value system that has given people widespread prosperity in those countries that embrace it, and guarantees respect for human rights and religion," Berlusconi said.

He added that the West "is bound to occidentalize and conquer new people... It has done it with the communist world and part of the Islamic world, but unfortunately, a part of the Islamic world is 1,400 years behind."

"From this point of view, we must be conscious of the strength and force of our civilization," he declared. The reaction was fast and furious.

Amr Moussa of Egypt, secretary-general of the Arab League, said: "I consider his remarks racist, and he has crossed the limits of reason and decency." Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi was just as harsh.

"These remarks are the result of the Italian prime minister's ignorance about Islam's culture and civilization and its fundamental impact on Western civilization," he said. Samuel Huntington formulated the theory of a "clash of civilizations" eight years ago.

The Harvard University professor argued that the fundamental source of conflict in the new post-Cold War era would be cultural, not ideological or economic.

"Conflict between civilizations will be the latest phase of the evolution of conflict in the modern world," he predicted.

The world, Huntington said, would be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight major civilizations, including Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and possibly African.

"The most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another," he added.

Not so, says Annan, because it is a "gross oversimplification" to speak of a Christian or Muslim or Buddhist civilization "and doing so only creates boundaries where none need exist."

Javid Zarif, professor of international law at the University of Teheran, adds: "If we advocate the possibility of a clash because of the events of Sept. 11, we have played into the hands of the terrorists because that is their ultimate objective."

"They wanted to see a clash and division on the international scene between one group and another," he says.

In November 1998, the General Assembly declared that the year 2001 would be the "Year of Dialogue among Civilizations." Iran initiated the proposal.

Giandomenic Picco, the Annan's personal representative for the initiative, says that after Sept. 11, the entire idea of a dialogue has taken

on new meaning.

"I have been approached by several governments with different requests focusing on this issue, which may be transformed into a soft tool of diplomacy against terrorism," says Picco.

"The dialogue, we believe, is philosophically at the opposite end of the spectrum from terrorism," he says. "Terrorists believe that diversity is equal to enmity and those who take the position that dialogue should be pursued believed in the opposite."

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami told the General Assembly that when his country proposed the idea of a dialogue, "few foresaw how soon this proposal could prove so instrumental in saving the world from an imminent war of carnage and devastation."

"The horrific terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 in the United States were perpetrated by a cult of fanatics who had self-mutilated their ears and tongues and could only communicate with perceived opponents through carnage and devastation," he said, speaking metaphorically of the alleged terrorists' inability to engage in dialogue.

Khatami said he has asked Annan to bring together heads of state to set an agenda for combating terrorism "and to unify international political will in uprooting this evil phenomenon."

"All cultures, civilizations, and faiths are now bound to co-habit the same world by the inviolable verdict of technology."

It is therefore the best of times to bring harmony and foster sympathy amidst this variety," he said.

Security

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to be, but says nothing about the access rights of the individual.

So, where does biometrics fit into this? It is the automatic identification of a person based on his/her physiological or behavioral characteristics. This method of identification is preferred over traditional methods involving passwords and PIN numbers for various reasons: (1) the person to be identified is required to be physically present at the point-of-identification; (2) identification based on biometric techniques removes the need to remember a password or carry a token. The techniques also decrease the potential for security and identity fraud.

With the increased use of computers as vehicles of security technology, it is necessary to restrict access to high-security areas, high-risk zones, and sensitive or personal data. By replacing PINs, biometric techniques can potentially prevent unauthorized access to or fraudulent use of ATMs, cellular phones, smart cards, desktop PCs, workstations and computer networks. PINs and passwords may be forgotten, and token-based methods of identification like passports and driver's licenses may be forged, stolen, or lost. As a result, biometric systems of identification are enjoying a renewed interest and dramatic growth.

Essentially, a biometric system is a pattern recognition system that makes a personal identification by determining the authenticity of a specific physiological or behavioral characteristic possessed by the user. An important issue in designing a practical system is to determine how an individual is identified. Depending on the context, a biometric system can be either a verification (authentication) system or an identification system.

Various types of biometric systems are being used for real-time identification. The most popular are based on face recognition and fingerprint matching. However, there are other biometric systems that utilize iris and retinal scans, speech patterns, facial thermograms, and hand geometry.

Biometrics is a rapidly evolving technology that is being widely used in forensic sciences such as criminal identification and prison security, and has the potential to be used in a large range of civilian applications. Biometrics can be used during transactions conducted via telephone and Internet (electronic commerce and electronic banking). In automobiles, biometrics can replace keys with key-less entry devices.

Though the field is still in its infancy, many people believe that biometrics will play a critical role in commercial security, business transactions, electronic commerce exchanges, and consumer safety technology.

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