

It gives me great pleasure to send this message to such a distinguished gathering of media and academic specialists and other professionals from the region. On behalf of UNESCO, I would like to commend the organizers of the Eurasian Media Forum for preparing this important event.

Almaty has become a centre for many of UNESCO's activities related to the region. Many of you will recall that a very important regional seminar for promoting Asian pluralistic and independent media was held in Almaty in 1992. This conference and the "Almaty Declaration" which emerged from it have become the basic reference for UNESCO's promotion of pluralistic media and their relation with civil society throughout the Asian region.

The main theme of your meeting - the relationship between the media and the dialogue among cultures and civilizations - is of great interest to UNESCO. As you know, 2001 was the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. Recognizing the need for a revitalization of global inter-cultural dialogue, UNESCO did much to promote the Year and subsequently has been engaged in many follow-up activities and initiatives. In the face of new forms of ignorance and prejudice that have appeared on the international scene, UNESCO is seeking to encourage intercultural dialogue through all its fields of competence - education, culture, the sciences, information and communication.

To this question, UNESCO brings its deep-rooted commitment to press freedom, freedom of expression and the development of free, independent and pluralistic media. These freedoms should be enjoyed by all peoples, regardless of cultural, religious, ethnic or other backgrounds. UNESCO has always maintained that "the free exchange of ideas and knowledge" as well as "the free flow of ideas by word and image", principles enshrined in its Constitution, are fundamental to human freedom and democracy.

Our respect for these principles means that we do not prescribe a particular role or set of responsibilities for the media in regard to dialogue among cultures and civilizations. These are matters of choice and judgment for media professionals themselves. I welcome your meeting as a useful and timely opportunity to discuss the many issues that arise. At times of international tension or in circumstances of conflict and inflamed opinion, intercultural misunderstanding may thrive and may even be fomented. Your analyses of and reflections upon the ways in which the media may address these questions are most pertinent in today's troubled world.

UNESCO believes that dialogue between people with different views, values and interests is preferable to violent conflict. But what are the best means for promoting dialogue? And what are the ends served by dialogue? We recognize that the conditions under which dialogue takes place, and the processes through which it is conducted, determine its quality and shape its outcomes. Where fear, hatred or prejudice prevail, dialogue is unlikely to be free or genuine. For those committed to making dialogue work, it is vital that earnest efforts are made to listen and to understand. Also to be borne in mind is the fact that dialogue is not an interminable conversation, nor is it an end in itself. An important consideration for your forum, therefore, is the purpose of dialogue.

The theme of your discussions is one, which arouses strong feelings and different, often opposed, beliefs. For that reason, clarity of thought, tolerance of diverse viewpoints and generosity of spirit are at a premium. It remains for me to wish you every success in your deliberations. I look forward to the outcomes of your meeting with much interest.