

Address
by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland,
Radosław Sikorski

Meeting with the Ambassadors of Moslem states

Warsaw, January 25 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I greatly appreciate this opportunity to meet with the ambassadors and other mission heads of Moslem states accredited in Warsaw; my special thanks go to the hostess of this function, the Ambassador of Pakistan, Madam Seemie Illachi Baloch, for her invitation. As Ambassador Baloch has requested, I will acquaint you with the main tenets of Polish foreign policy toward Moslem states. Later, I will be glad to answer any questions you may have concerning those and other aspects of our foreign policy.

First, let me emphasize that Poland has always shown great esteem for Islam and its followers. We have a long tradition of tolerance and coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups. Throughout centuries, up until World War II, we were a multiethnic and multi-religious nation, which meant that we were also multicultural. Conflicts with the Ottoman Empire did not undermine our respect for Islam, openness to its cultural influence and the ultimately friendly relations with Turkey. A community of Moslem Tartars has enjoyed universal esteem in Poland for centuries; its members have enriched Polish culture and displayed outstanding patriotism throughout its history. In the 16th and 17th centuries Polish Tartars had the status of gentry and enjoyed the attendant political rights. During the Twenties and Thirties, they even formed a separate military unit within the Polish army.

In free and independent Poland, Moslem faithful have full civic rights. They enjoy freedom of religious practice and association. Pope John Paul II was a strong proponent of dialog and conciliation between Christians and Moslems. In his message on the occasion of World Peace Day in 2001, the Polish Pope remarked: “Dialog leads to recognition of diversity and opens the mind to the mutual acceptance and genuine collaboration demanded by the human family’s basic vocation to unity”.

Poland is not burdened with a colonial past. What’s more, we are probably better placed than other Europeans to understand the problems of nations which – like Poles – have had to fight for their freedom. Tens of thousands of Poles

deported to Central Asia in 1940 were treated with amity by local Moslem Kazakhs. We also remember that the thousands of Polish soldiers and civilians who were evacuated from the USSR during World War II found safe havens in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Palestine. We are grateful to this day for the helping hand extended to us when we found ourselves in need.

Excellencies,

In recent years the significance of Moslem states has been rising in Polish foreign policy. That is not only connected with our accession to the European Union and NATO, the resultant involvement in shaping their policies and with our engagement in Iraq in Afghanistan. Globalization also plays its part: as distances shrink between the respective regions, our economic and other relations with Moslem states naturally become more intensive.

As a member of the European Union, we are involved in the Middle East process and are boosting our aid to the Palestinian population. We participate in the Barcelona Process, implementation of the strategic EU-Africa partnership (approved in Lisbon last December), cooperation with the Gulf States Cooperation Council and in dialog with Iran. The European Union needs to be an active player in the Middle East peace process – due to its world position, long-term commitment in the region and its striving to consolidate a positive image in the Moslem world. It should not only act as a leading donor of material aid, but should also seek to build mutual confidence between the parties to the conflict, ultimately leading to an Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation at political and inter-human level. In this context, we intend to uphold the Polish initiative of a Palestinian-Israeli round table, drawing on the Polish experience of reconciliation with our neighbors.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with its tragic religious and ethnic background, poses a serious threat to international order. Thus, it is a matter of great urgency to find a solution to the conflict, so that it no longer poisons the inter-cultural and political relations between the faithful of the three main monotheistic religions on the global scale. Any solution, if it is to be durable, must take into account the national aspirations of both parties to the conflict, and provide for mutual recognition of completely sovereign and independent Israeli and Palestinian states. The attainment of that goal by the Palestinian side (including Hamas) requires rejection of violence and recognition of the Israeli state. As for Israel – it must not only accept a Palestinian state, but also facilitate its establishment and independent functioning. We hope that implementation of the provisions of the Annapolis conference, in which I had the honor of participating, will enhance the creation of a Palestinian state and resolution of other contentious issues in Arab-Israeli relations.

As NATO member, we are involved in the Alliance's Mediterranean dialog, in the Istanbul initiative addressed to the Gulf states and in NATO's stabilization mission in Afghanistan, where we have dispatched 1200 troops. Ensuring the stabilization of Afghanistan is one of our policy priorities outside Europe. Poland is committed to active participation in rebuilding that country's infrastructure and its administrative institutions. We want to assume direct responsibility for the defense and reconstruction of one of the eastern provinces. The most profound challenges here include restoring the rule of law and addressing problems caused by growing drugs production, economic collapse, insufficient access to education and shortage of jobs. We feel it is our moral duty to assist Afghanistan. By doing so, we express our concern for the well-being of its population and support the country's government. As someone who during the Eighties personally witnessed and experienced the conflict in Afghanistan, I support this policy unreservedly. In 2008, Poland will increase its engagement in the process of restoring security and rebuilding Afghanistan, both in the military, political and development assistance spheres.

Poland has been involved in the stabilization mission in Iraq since 2003. The decision to become engaged in that country was not easy, and it was motivated by a sense of responsibility for international security and our wish to fulfill our allied obligations. The Government of Mr. Donald Tusk has taken an irrevocable decision to end the military mission in October. We feel that we have performed our tasks with due dedication and responsibility. The area of operation of the Polish Military Contingent will find itself in good hands – those of the Eighth Iraqi Division - trained by Polish troops and considered one of the best in the whole country. The time has come for the Iraqis to assume responsibility for their own country. The situation in Iraq is gradually stabilizing and the main political forces have begun cooperating. We are now offering Iraq technical and training assistance; we want to focus our bilateral cooperation on economic issues.

Poland has welcomed the improvement of cooperation with Iran, reported by the Secretary General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohammed El-Baradei, particularly the progress in resolving outstanding issues concerning the past of the Iranian nuclear problem. We hope cooperation will be continued, in line with the timetable endorsed by both sides. We want the question of the Iranian nuclear program to be resolved by way of negotiations and defusing tensions, which have had an adverse impact on the atmosphere in the region.

Poland wishes to make a contribution to world stability and peace. Accordingly, we have also been engaged in UN peace missions: since 1974 – in UNDOF, in the Golan Heights, and since 1992 – in UNIFIL, in south Lebanon.

We hope for close cooperation with Pakistan. Together with other EU member states, we call on all political forces in the country to take active part in the forthcoming elections and thus contribute to Pakistan's stabilization and strengthening of democracy.

Excellencies,

Poland can offer something of great value to other countries: its own experience gained in the process of systemic transformations. We are convinced that systemic transformation is the only path for ambitious nations seeking a better future. We have learned first-hand that modernization and democratization is not an easy undertaking and it can be painful to large segments of society. But, looking back over the past 19 years, we can say with full confidence that it was worth it. And that is why today, when the sense of such endeavors is sometimes questioned, we advocate their continuation with even greater conviction. In offering our own experience, we are guided by solidarity with nations in need.

This year will see the launching of a new strategy of Polish foreign aid for the years 2008-2015. It provides for our participation in the global partnership in support of development and international solidarity. We will be involved in projects to reduce poverty, ensure sustainable development and implement the Millennium Development Goals. We also want to advance democracy, human rights, the rule of law and good governance. For the past several years the directions of Polish foreign aid have remained unchanged. In addition to states in Eastern Europe, we are providing assistance to countries that need help in Central Asia, Afghanistan, the Palestinian Autonomy, Iraq and countries of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Excellencies,

The five decades of European integration have brought unquestionable and perhaps even surprising success of the European idea. It is epitomized by today's European Union with its 27 member states. Recently, the EU adopted the Lisbon Treaty. We look forward to its quick ratification by the member states. Its entry into force will give the Union a chance to become a robust, efficient and solidary organism. The Lisbon Treaty, by raising the Union's cohesion, enhances its external effectiveness and position on the international arena. This is concordant with the expectations of the international community, including Moslem states, that the Union will play a more prominent role in world politics.

There are good prospects that the Common Foreign and Security Policy – strengthened by the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty - will boost the European Union's significance, in line with its economic potential, dynamic growth and influence around the world. We attach substantial hopes to the establishment of new Union institutions: the permanent President of the European Council, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the External Action Service and also to the upgrading of consular collaboration. These are ambitious plans and Poland wants to be active in their implementation.

Meanwhile, I feel it is essential to keep developing the European Security and Defense Policy. The international community needs to have greater response capacity when stability is threatened in any of the hotspots around the world. That does not imply the Union's rivalry with the North Atlantic Alliance. On the contrary, we are seeking better utilization of NATO resources, whenever NATO as a whole does not become engaged and the Union can perform the stabilization task better. Poland will be contributing 350 troops to the European Union's mission in Chad. It will be a humanitarian mission, designed to ensure basic security and decent living conditions for refugees from Darfur.

Poland is committed to the continuation of the Union's enlargement. The 2004 enlargement has energized the EU, so the process should not be halted. European policy must abandon its inclination to be self-centered and focused on possible negative aspects of further enlargement. On the contrary, we should be primarily guided by a long-term strategic vision and the principle of solidarity. Thus, we advocate future enlargement to cover the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and Turkey. The presence of Turkey in the structures of united Europe would not only benefit that country, but also the entire Union and the Middle East, enhancing regional stability. We also feel that the Union should move towards joint recognition of the independence of Kosovo. However, the case of Kosovo must not be seen as constituting a precedent for other separatist regions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Poland attaches great importance to the further development of political, security, economic and cultural cooperation with Moslem countries. This is likely to be facilitated by the large number of citizens of those countries who were educated in Poland and by the vibrant community of Polish Oriental-studies specialists. Our citizens, enjoying greater prosperity as a result of our successful transformations, are traveling in increasing numbers to Moslem countries, which stimulates mutual knowledge and understanding of our societies. We intend to keep promoting such links.

This meeting offers a good opportunity to affirm Poland's commitment to develop and consolidate its relations with the states you represent. We have a long tradition of amicable and mutually beneficial relations, including broad economic collaboration. Polish specialists have built many industrial plants and completed numerous infrastructural projects in Moslem countries; Polish manufactured goods are known and appreciated there. Yet we realize that the potential for economic cooperation is not fully utilized. The share of trade with Moslem countries in Poland's overall trade amounts to just 3.5 per cent, while the share of Moslem countries in world trade tops 10% . The Polish government will work to change this situation.

We are highly interested in diversifying Poland's energy supplies. In this regard, we see great prospects for cooperation with such energy exporters as Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. We want to boost Polish exports and attract investors from those countries. The visit to Warsaw last year by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia gave a powerful stimulus to Polish-Saudi and Polish-Arab relations. Meanwhile, Polish exporters have signed major contracts with Malaysia and Indonesia. We look forward to more such contacts with Moslem states.

Excellencies,

The advancement of cooperation should serve better coexistence between two great communities: the West, rooted in Christian tradition, and Islam. Dialog between civilizations can be of crucial importance here. A pivotal role in this dialog is assigned to the European Union, which – for historical, geographical and demographical reasons – needs to work out a formula of coexistence and collaboration with the Moslem world. Our partners in dialog among the Moslem countries should include both lay and moderate Islamic communities.

An important role in the dialog with Islam should be played by Europe's Christian community , through direct contacts between leaders of Christian churches and religious leaders in Moslem countries, through dialog with Moslem leaders and communities in Europe, and through work with European societies. Such typical modern-day phenomena as alienation, crisis of values and material fears caused by economic problems can feed social tensions and lead to the emergence of negative stereotypes. It is a challenge for both Europeans and Moslem societies to counter such tensions and stereotypes, often brought on by intolerance, terrorism and uncontrolled migration.

We need to work hand-in-hand to advance that dialog, and we can do this by helping shape a positive image of both civilizations. Poland would like to encourage the states represented by Your Excellencies to become involved in

shaping a positive image of Islam in the Western world, and a positive image of the West in Moslem countries. We are aware that the Moslem side feels a deep need for dialog with the Western civilization and is ready for it.

Ambassador Baloch,

In conclusion, let me emphasize that the reality of the Moslem world certainly is not defined by the problems I have mentioned. At this point I would like to highlight the magnificent Moslem cultural attainments, which throughout centuries have also inspired us, Europeans. Today, too, the Moslem world is enriching human civilization. It constitutes a powerful potential of young, vigorous and ambitious societies with valuable assets at their disposal. Poland will support all actions designed to ensure that this potential is put to a good use.

Thank you for your attention.