

24 September 2013 - Opening of the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly - Statement by Mr. François Hollande, President of the Republic

(Unofficial translation)

Mr. President,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The UN's honour comes from acting whenever people's freedom is denied. The UN's honour comes from acting whenever fundamental rights are compromised. The UN's honour comes from intervening when extremism threatens international security. The UN's honour comes from acting to advance peace.

SYRIA

And in Syria, the situation is urgent.

Urgent because 120,000 people have died in the past two and a half years, 90,000 in the last year alone. A quarter of the population has been displaced. Millions of Syrians have become refugees. And the country has been destroyed.

The worst happened in Damascus on 21 August, when chemical weapons were used against civilians, women and children.

The UN inspectors – the very ones we sent, as part of our organization – have clearly and indisputably established the use of these weapons. Faced with such a horrific crime, France wanted a strong reaction to punish this violation of international law and to deter Bashar al-Assad's regime from committing new massacres. The pressure exerted by my country and others, notably the United States, has produced the first results, because today, negotiations are under way to guarantee the verification and destruction of chemical weapons.

But in order for us to see these negotiations through, I am putting forward three requirements.

The first is that the text must clearly open the way for the Security Council to take up the matter of chemical weapons at any time.

The second is that the resolution we are preparing must provide for coercive measures, i.e. under Chapter VII, should the Syrian regime fail to abide by its commitments. That is in fact what is stipulated in the agreement signed by the Russians and the Americans. One more reason to adopt it as part of the resolution.

The third requirement is that those who committed these crimes must be held accountable in the courts. But beyond this resolution, which should be adopted in the near future, we cannot stop. We must end this war, the most deadly one since this century began. The solution is political and too much time has been wasted. And I'm not going to bring up the blocking of the Security Council again. During this period, not only did the regime step up its violent actions, but terrorist groups took advantage of the international community's inertia, to the detriment of the democratic forces within the Syrian National Coalition. That's why Geneva 2 must be held promptly. But for France, the Geneva 2 meeting isn't about talking, it must be a decision-making conference.

What is the objective? To install an interim government with full executive powers whose mission could be to restore civil peace, to protect all communities and to organize elections when the time comes. Sometimes I'm asked about the participants in this conference. My answer is simple: all countries – yes, all countries – are welcome provided they accept the objective of installing a transitional government and clearly acknowledge their commitment to a political solution.

The emergency is also humanitarian. In Syria, displaced persons number in the millions and there are now more than 1.5 million refugees distributed among Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Lebanon, whose unity and security are directly threatened by the prolongation of this crisis. Nearly 20% of its population is now of Syrian origin. I want to thank Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for organizing the first meeting of the International Support Group for Lebanon. France is committed to that country because we know how much it has suffered in recent years from the unrest in the Middle East, and how much it must be supported today in its efforts to take in refugees.

ISRAELIS/PALESTINIANS

There are grave concerns in this part of the Middle East, but there are also rays of hope.

The first is the resumption of negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. Only negotiations will lead to peace, which is dependent on the coexistence of two states with secure, recognized borders. We must do everything we can to ensure that this opportunity that is now presenting itself to Israelis, Palestinians and the entire region is finally seized, in order to end a conflict whose regional and international repercussions we're all familiar with. Negotiating peace between the Israelis and Palestinians would be a historic act.

IRAN

The statements by the new Iranian President represent the second ray of hope, because they mark a shift. I don't want to exaggerate, but the question now is whether these words might translate into actions, particularly on the nuclear front. Discussions have been stalled for 10 years, forcing the international community to adopt increasingly harsh sanctions. We all know this situation is dangerous. So France expects Iran to make concrete gestures proving that that country renounces its military nuclear programme, although it is perfectly entitled to pursue its civilian programme. That is why I have chosen to engage in a direct and candid dialogue with President Rouhani. But let me say here that as much as I am in favour of dialogue, I remain firm on the key issue of nuclear proliferation.

KENYA

The Middle East is not the only region in the world that concerns us. Africa is prey to terrorism. The barbarous attack in Nairobi tragically confirms this yet again.

MALI

Victories against terrorism are possible. In Mali, for example, with a clear mandate from the Security Council, African and French forces with support from the Europeans responded to the Bamako authorities' appeal to intervene, and succeeded in ending a large-scale terrorist offensive. Today the results speak for themselves. Mali has regained all of its territory, is guaranteeing the security of its population, and even managed to hold presidential elections on schedule, elections that were recognized as indisputable. Here I would like to welcome the new President of Mali, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, who represents a great West African victory against terrorism.

LIBYA

But the threat continues in the Sahel, and also in Libya where weapons are circulating and terrorist groups have found refuge. There too we must help the Libyan authorities to guarantee the security of their territory and their population. France stands ready.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

I would now like to issue a call of alarm, as I did last year with respect to Mali. That alarm concerns the Central African Republic, a small country that has been ravaged for too many years by coups d'état and conflicts. Chaos has now taken hold there. And once again, civilians are its victims. We must put an end to these atrocities, which are also sectarian in nature. That is why I hope the Security Council will issue a mandate and grant logistical and financial means to an African force whose first mission would be to restore stability in the Central African Republic.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, women and children are raped each day in the Kivu region. Here, too, it is imperative for us to continue strengthening Monusco, implementing the Addis Ababa agreement and rejecting all foreign interference.

AFRICA/SECURITY

We must learn from the experiences of recent years. Wherever unrest prevails, terrorism takes hold and spreads. That is the case in Somalia. The attack on Kenya reminds us that al-Shabaab groups, while they may have been defeated, have not yet been eradicated.

That is why the international community must help the African nations to protect themselves.

At the end of the year, France will hold a meeting on peace and security in Africa. It has invited all the African nations to attend. Europe will be represented. The UN too. It's about providing training and equipment for African armies so that they themselves can guarantee the continent's security, combat all forms of trafficking, notably drugs, and fight piracy. The Africans must ensure their own security. But we cannot let them stand alone in the face of terrorist threats.

DEVELOPMENT/INNOVATIVE FINANCING

Our best weapon is the policy to promote development.

Because poverty, unemployment and inequalities sadly provide the most fertile soil for violence and insecurity. Here too, France is calling for the international community to mobilize through the establishment of new funds to finance vital infrastructures and allow access to essential public services.

France is campaigning, together with Europe, for the introduction of innovative financing. First, the tax on plane tickets that benefits UNITAID and has brought in €1 billion since 2006. My country has decided to increase this tax by an additional 10% in order to further improve what we can do to combat the major pandemics (AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria).

France, again with Europe, has instituted a financial transaction tax, and I've decided to allocate 10% of its revenues to activities relating to development, water access and renewable energies. Because in this way, through development, we will help the poorest countries to assure their future and hence their security.

CLIMATE CHANGE

And also to be able to respond to the challenge of climate change, which concerns all of us.

France has stated that it is ready to host the climate conference. Here too, our own security is under threat. Because successive reports all say that if we do nothing, the temperature of our planet will have increased by 3 to 4 degrees by the end of the century. We know the consequences: flooding in some places, drought in others. With direct threats to peace around the world.

So we must try to reach an agreement at this climate conference in 2015. The foundations for this compromise are well known. The agreement must be fair. Everyone must do their bit. The developed countries, which must of course make the biggest effort. The emerging countries, which should not undermine their development but must also understand that climate change threatens them directly. Lastly, the least developed, most fragile, most vulnerable countries need to be supported in this transformation. That's the purpose of the Green Climate Fund created in Durban.

This agreement must also be binding. It cannot just involve the restating of principles; it cannot just be a mantra in resolutions that will not be put into practice. Because if there's no assessment, if there are no sanctions, there will be no progress. And then there will be an inexorable rise in global warming.

UN REFORM

Ladies and gentlemen,

My message is simple. In all areas – international security, nuclear proliferation, development, climate change – the greatest risk is inaction. The worst decision is not to take any decisions. The greatest danger is not recognizing this.

The UN has a responsibility to take action. And whenever our organization proves to be powerless, it's peace that pays the price. That's why I am proposing that a code of good conduct be defined by the permanent members of the Security Council, and that in the event of a mass crime they can decide to collectively renounce their veto powers.

Finally, I hope the Secretary-General's investigative powers will be strengthened and that the UN can, as it did in Syria, establish the truth everywhere, conduct investigations and act accordingly. Our Assembly can independently decide to do this.

Our credibility depends on our ability to intervene swiftly and effectively to enforce international law, sanction any breaches, promote development and save future generations.

We have the legitimacy to do so. It's rooted in the UN Charter. We must be worthy of it.

This is the context in which France will always assume its responsibilities in all matters.

Thank you.