



Remarks

by

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President of the 68th Session of the United Nations

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Please check against delivery

Heads of State and Government,
Honourable Ministers,
Heads of Delegation,
Excellencies,
Secretary General,
Distinguished Guest,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a special privilege for me to welcome you to the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly.

As I do so I am reminded of the long journey to this point in time – a journey that began nearly sixty-years ago on the twin-island nation of Antigua and Barbuda in the Caribbean. There, in a household of seven kids, whose parents never had the opportunity to complete high school and could therefore not provide academic guidance to their offspring, one child, whose paternal grandfather signed his name with a X and whose mother was a descendant of slave plantation owners in the sister island of Barbados, was determined to be the first in his family's generation to attend University and seek an opportunity wherever it may occur to make a difference.

I AM THAT CHILD of those parents!

And as I was reminded just yesterday at the ceremony for the unveiling of the winning design for the Permanent Memorial to honour victims of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the ancestral journey began centuries ago, in an era when unspeakable cruelty and man's inhumanity to man were in full bloom and were in many ways the currency of the day. And while the more recent history was one filled with tremendous challenges and opportunities, it has nevertheless been quite a journey.

I therefore stand before you today deeply humbled and honored to address this Assembly of Nations- this gathering which is a unique representation and expression of our collective thoughts and actions.

Excellencies,

We come from nations big and small: some landlocked and others surrounded by seas; some prosperous and others striving to develop, but we all live in a world where constant change is the norm. In fact, this Session convenes in a climate and at a time in history in which your Organization is itself in the process of change; I not only refer to physical changes, but to the task of crafting a more responsive UN with a new strategic thrust, which will shape global development beyond 2015.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This annual gathering of world leaders and dignitaries should not just be seen as another September routine or tradition; rather, it serves and should serve another larger and better purpose: that of recommitting ourselves and our countries to the noble ideals that lie at the organization's core.

As we gather here again – and for many of you it is the first time – including my two sons sitting at the back - in slightly more modest surroundings that is now our Hall, the world's headlines are filled with reports of wars - imminent or impending; civil and sectarian blood-shed and strife between, as well as within states; grinding poverty and malnutrition; gender violence; adverse effects of climate change and loss of valuable biodiversity; and the struggles of men, women and the young seeking to live with human dignity and peace. Now with clear awareness that the scourge of chemical warfare has been unleashed in Syria, we are as a community of nations confronted by a need to address this wrong.

Against this background, we are assembled here at this Assembly amidst circumstances that increasingly cause many to wonder whether the vision of our founding fathers (and mothers) as articulated in the Charter is achievable or realistic.

Across this world of ours, we see rising ethnic and religious extremism, gender inequities, growing unrest and political tensions, and increasing socio-economic inequalities. We see women dying in childbirth; girl children marrying before the age of ten (10); and the young who dare not dream of a future because they know all too well there may never be one.

And yet we are gathered here today despite the odds that are against us, to give human expression to the hard work it takes to make multilateralism work for the benefit of all.

Effective multilateralism takes dogged determination and a commitment to negotiate and work cooperatively, especially if the quest is to evolve towards a shared consensus that is both broad and lasting. It also requires frank and unvarnished scrutiny of the work of our Assembly, and it is time for us to concede that our efforts at reforming and revitalizing our organization need new impetus.

Excellencies,

Please indulge me here because at heart I am an engineer- but it is as if, having set out on a long journey towards an agreed destination, our vehicle has developed engine trouble that slows our progress and prevents us from making good speed towards our destination. We tinker with roadmaps, plans and directions without consensus on what needs fixing and the best means to fix it. And while, we the leaders, as drivers of the vehicle remain parked some distance from our final destination, debating how best to fix the engine, our passengers, who are the citizens of the world, look on powerless and voiceless, many of them dying of hunger and thirst with no access to food or clean water.

The question before us then is: will we be able to work together and fix our vehicle so that we can progress on the journey to effect real and meaningful change?

Distinguished Delegates,

I must confess that I see contained within the Presidency of the General Assembly a great paradox.

The holder of this office is exposed to enormous pressures from various sides on any particular issue relevant to the mandate of the United Nations; he or she must display endless patience; must not be discouraged by others' cynicism; must manifest an unswerving dedication to, and belief in, the principles and purposes of the Organization; must be strong enough to overcome set-backs, must empathise with all members and yet be dispassionate and even-handed, showing no fear or favour to one over the other, must endlessly improvise as he or she seeks to nudge one side or the other, or preferably both, toward common ground. And YET, the paradox is that the President of the General Assembly is without power to commit Member States to a particular course of action, and must not only remain neutral but be seen as so, if she or he is to retain any credibility. She or he can do no more than reflect, and appeal to states to work together, in the hope that appropriate and requisite international cooperation will be achieved.

Now, having said all of the above, I can therefore make an immediate appeal to you the Member States to recognize these limitations on the Presidency, and show kind consideration by working effectively towards our shared agenda.

Distinguished Guests,

We have been told by our forebearers that when we are faced with overwhelming odds, it is not our limitations that define us; rather, it is what we do to overcome them. As I said in my June acceptance speech from this very podium, coming from small- island developing State I take to heart the often-repeated maxim: no man (or woman) is an

island. Given the giant tasks ahead of us we need to rely – indeed depend – on each other if we are to perform effectively on this shared journey.

Therefore, whenever we see gaps between the vision of the Charter and the realities around us, let the search to bridge them begin with ourselves. Let it begin with an examination, by each one of us, of the attitudes that we bring to this forum. Let us remember that no state can abrogate the principles of the Charter without doing serious harm to the fabric of our shared organization.

As your President, I am prepared to make contributions of good sound advice, and point you in the direction where I think the balance of the interests of the entire international community lies. But it is you, the Member States, who must do the heavy lifting and commit to working on a shared agenda.

Excellencies,

On this issue of our shared agenda, I am pleased to note that recently there have been some encouraging achievements, which demonstrate that we know how to make the UN work for us as a collective and collaborative organization. It was little more than five months ago, on April 2nd, that for the first time in the history of its engagement with conventional weapons, the General Assembly was able to adopt an Arms Trade Treaty regulating the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons. It is expected that this instrument – which has now been signed by 83 states, and ratified by four - will help significantly reduce the murderous and destabilizing effects of the proliferation of such weapons.

Also, I recall with immense satisfaction that in 2000, this body adopted the Millennium Declaration and, subsequently the Millennium Development Goals which united the international community around an ambitious series of goals for development. More recently, at Rio+20, we resolved to craft a post-2015 development agenda.

Defining our post-2015 development agenda is crucial to the overall work and longer term efficacy of the UN and that is why I have selected as the theme for this 68th Session, “The Post-2015 Development Agenda; Setting the Stage.” Under this rubric, and to assist Member States in defining the outlines of this new Agenda, I have identified three High Level Events and three Thematic Debates, which will be held in the course of the present Session. The details of these are already well-known and have been previously shared with all of you.

This new development agenda is expected to have poverty eradication as its central and over-arching goal and to address the inseparable link between economic growth, equity and social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. The Post-2015 Development Agenda is envisaged as the most far-reaching and comprehensive development-related endeavour ever undertaken by our Organization in its entire history. Embracing states in all aspects of the sustainable development spectrum, it will completely redefine the concept of development as traditionally understood, rooting it in partnership, cooperation, equity - both social and generational - peace, good governance and economic growth based on environmental sustainability.

Excellencies,

As we start this 68th Session, on the one hand we urgently need tangible results and action by our Assembly; on the other hand, we are faced with high levels of pessimism and cynicism that we will not be up to the task and that we lack the effort and discipline to effectively address the world’s needs. Let us prove the nay-sayers wrong- let us put our shoulders to the plough and work with each other in a spirit of collaboration. Let us focus on the business ahead, cognisant of the sacred trust which brings us here, committed to the peoples we serve, looking beyond individual and narrow interests, and intention concluding the work we must do here. Let us not forget that while we sit in this august gathering, there are millions who go to sleep in the dark, hungry and insecure, fearful of what another tomorrow may bring.

Let us not be distracted or disturbed by pessimism and polemics. Instead, I invite you to look around and see in your presence here, a reaffirmation of your belief in the principles of the Charter, and in the value of international cooperation for the common good. Let us never forget the still fundamental belief that the ties that bind us are stronger and more enduring than the differences that threaten to keep us apart.

We have assembled here from different states, each with its own particular set of strengths, challenges and needs, and from different regions, cultures and faiths, all sharing the single purpose of helping to ensure that this Assembly will take us further along the road to creating the kind of world envisioned in our Charter - a world of security, peace, justice, adherence to the rule of law, respect for the planet, tolerance, equal rights for all, social progress and faith in the dignity and worth of the human person. And, recognising how far we have come, conceding how far there is yet to go, let us all recommit to the path of protecting the planet and ensuring peace, prosperity, and dignity for all who inhabit it.

Thank you.