

**Address by the President of the Republic of Estonia Alar Karis at the 77th
United Nations General Assembly
21.09.2022**

Mr President,
Mr Secretary General,
Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honour to be here today, though I wish the circumstances surrounding my first address were different. A year ago, Mr. Secretary General presented his inspiring report “Our Common Agenda” – outlining his vision for the next 25-years of global cooperation, and initiated discussions on how to reinvigorate multilateralism and achieve sustainable development goals.

I support the goals of the report and yet, it is a Herculean task, because the world is torn apart; we witness the constant brutal violation of the core principles of the UN Charter on every continent;

United Nations itself has become a battlefield where some states try to convince the world that the common values we all are obliged to adhere to, do not exist.

The only standard we must follow is the UN Charter - our unique common promise of peace for all nations large and small, a promise of advancing fundamental human rights, the equal rights of men and women. It is not a choice, it is a collective responsibility to ensure that peace, justice and human rights prevail.

On 24th of February the Russian Federation, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, attacked a democratic and peaceful sovereign Ukraine. Russia started a war of aggression with a goal to end the sovereignty of its neighbour, overthrow its legitimate government, exterminate Ukrainian nation, and implement its abusive order, impregnated of imperialism, self-interest and dominance.

Russian invasion, including the illegal occupation of Crimea and Russia's prior land grabs in Georgia and Moldova demonstrate Russia's total disrespect of international law, the rules-based international order and are an assault on the UN Charter, every value and principle the United Nations stands for.

This brutal and unjustified aggression is the most serious threat to the global peace and security since the end of the Second World War and challenges the very foundation of the UN system, undermining the security of all members of international community.

Some colleagues are hesitant to take sides vis-a-vis Russian aggression. Some argue that this war is between Russia and Ukraine. I see the aggressor and the victim. Legally as well as morally, there's only one right side to take. Standing in the grey zone encourages the aggressor, undermines this organisation and fuels human suffering.

In recent years we have witnessed devastating human suffering in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Yemen, Syria, Sahel, and the Horn of Africa, just to name a few. The war of aggression of Russia makes finding solutions to these conflicts only more difficult. As it has increased food insecurity, adds stress on the global humanitarian relief system and bolsters economic crisis.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I visited Ukraine two months after the invasion began. The site was horrific. I lack words to describe the brutality of this scene. The face of war is the same everywhere. Its cruelty will never leave the people who must live through this. Wars and conflicts only bring horror and misery to mankind.

As of August 22, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has recorded in Ukraine over 13 000 civilian casualties with approximately 6000 killed and nearly 8000 injured.

The actual numbers are significantly higher. Each murder is another evidence of the grave violations of international law by the aggressor.

In the strongest terms, we condemn the war crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine. UN Assistant Secretary General on Human Rights reported to the Security Council about credible allegations of forced transfers of unaccompanied children to Russian occupied territory, or to the Russian Federation. We have seen mass graves of tortured civilians, I wonder, are we living in the XXI Century?

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen,

I want to pay tribute to the immeasurable resilience of the people of Ukraine. We grieve for the victims of Russia's aggression and stand with Ukraine in ensuring a future for its people and nation.

This brave nation is fighting for values set in the UN Charter, the noble cause of freedom, democracy and human rights. According to the UN Charter Article 51. Helping Ukraine to protect its right to exist is our collective obligation.

At the same time, it is disturbing that the United Nations Security Council, a body that bears the chief responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, has been paralysed and utterly unable to play its role.

Russia has abused its veto power to block the Council from adopting any decisions regarding the grave violation of sovereignty and independence of Ukraine. The Security Council lies in the heart of the UN, it is shameful that, since February 24, it has adopted only one statement (6 May 2022) on Ukraine. How many devastating wars will it take to move forward the long overdue Security Council reform?

I am grateful that while the Security Council remains paralysed on Russia's aggression issue, the soul and conscience of the UN, the General Assembly has been active and decisive. I recall the overwhelming support for the UN General Assembly's resolution on March 2 that condemned Russia's aggression and urged Russia to immediately and unconditionally withdraw all of its troops from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders.

We deplore the Russian Federation's failure to implement this resolution as well as its failure to comply with the legally binding order by the International Court of Justice of 16 March 2022, requiring Russia to immediately cease its use of force against Ukraine.

Estonia has always been a strong proponent of curbing the absolute veto power, and even more so when it has been used to cover war crimes and crimes against humanity.

I am glad that the General Assembly adopted by consensus a landmark resolution, the so-called veto initiative, which provides the UN General Assembly an opportunity to step in, when the UN Security Council is unable to act. The question remains, how can we accept that aggressor has a veto power in the Security Council?

Excellences,

Conflicts and war bring enormous humanitarian crisis. Russia`s aggression has led to an immense need of resources and aid. Nearly 18 million Ukrainians – 40 per cent of the country`s population – are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. The international support for Ukraine has been heart-warming.

The UN, is busy helping Ukrainians who didn´t need our help before this aggression. To date, Estonia has sent over 20 million EUR in humanitarian aid to Ukraine. We have seen an unprecedented massive support of Ukraine from the Estonian private sector, civil society and citizens.

We continue to assist and work on the reconstruction of Ukraine – it needs to begin already now. We call others to join us in this.

Conflicts created immense refugee crisis. According to the UN Refugee Agency, the total number of people worldwide, who were forced to flee their homes due to conflicts and human rights violations, was 89.3 million in 2021. The displacements were driven, for example, by the brutality of the Bashar al-Assad regime, conflict in the Tigray region and the Taliban's takeover of Kabul. In 2022 this number has already exceeded the milestone of 100 million, increase is caused by the Russia's war of aggression.

There are more than 7 million recorded Ukrainian refugees across Europe, another 7 million have been internally displaced. Estonia has received nearly 55,000 refugees, 4 percent of our country's population. We ensure social services and basic education to refugee's fleeing from war.

Estonia has created 1,000 additional places in different education programs for Ukrainian refugee children by opening a new school - The Freedom School. One day, its students will be the leaders and rebuilders of Ukraine. Estonian education technology companies are donating their solutions to support Ukrainian schools and pupils whose education has been disrupted by the war.

Why am I telling all this? Because our future depends on the youth sitting in the classrooms and on their **education**. We are made by history, we cannot let the lack of knowledge to define our future. To avoid such a brutality repeat itself we have to raise awareness of the history of our nations. We need to evade confusions caused by the active brainwash and disinformation. We see how ignorance makes it easy for any aggressor to put forward its false narratives.

War and conflict, lack of openness bring along extreme violations of human rights. It must be clear that basic human rights are universal, same for all UN members and cannot be ignored by any government. Special attention should be devoted to ensuring gender equality and right to education. Opportunity to study should not be a wish or a dream at the 21st century.

Let me use this tribune to praise the courageous women who have now become the forefront of protest against the Taliban in Afghanistan to fight for their right to choose their own path and role in the society. It is our profound duty to support their struggle. I call on de facto leaders of Afghanistan to immediately stop harassing the UNAMA Afghan female staff. Respecting universal human rights is not a choice. Neither culture nor religion can be invoked to justify human rights violations.

In the same vein we welcome the release of the assessment report of human rights situation in Xinjiang by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The report underscores the serious human rights violations occurring in Xinjiang, which, may constitute international crimes, in particular, crimes against humanity. This is extremely alarming and requires urgent attention by the international community.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There remains little dispute over the existential crisis posed by climate change. We witnessed devastating flooding in Pakistan caused by erratic monsoon rains. In solidarity with the people of Pakistan, Estonia provides help to those severely affected. Russia's aggression also brings further pain to those already suffering from the impacts of the pandemic, conflicts, famine and climate change.

Let me be very clear, this aggression has brought high inflation, global food and energy crisis. The head of the UN World Food Programme has warned that the Russia's aggression will lead to the worst food crisis since World War II. In physics and in life the cause triggers a reaction. Russia's aggression triggered the global food and inflation crisis. We have witnessed Russia's occupying forces stealing Ukraine's grain supplies, burning down warehouses and destroying grain fields.

Market disruptions are not caused by sanctions, global food and economic crisis are caused by the war Russia started and Russia can end all this by ending the war. Yet, Russia has no intention to end the war. Instead Russian regime decided to escalate. We find its cynical nuclear threat totally unacceptable and it is a threat to global community.

To alleviate the crisis, the EU has launched the EU-Ukraine "solidarity lanes" initiative, it has helped to export over 6 million tonnes of predominantly agricultural goods from Ukraine.

Estonia also welcomes the Black Sea Grain Initiative that was signed in Istanbul on 22 July brokered by the UN Secretary-General and President of Türkiye. We must keep the international pressure on Russia to monitor Russia's adherence to the deal and its extension.

Excellences,

We follow with deep concern the situation in one of the world's largest Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. Russia has occupied the plant and turned it into a combat zone. The risk of a nuclear disaster is very real. This Power Plant should be demilitarized without delay, and full control of the plant returned to Ukraine.

Moreover, it is essential to grant IAEA experts a persistent and unfettered access to the facilities of the power plant. I regret, that last month, Russia also shamelessly blocked the consensus concerning the outcome document of the Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation.

Estonia has been vocal in addressing the issues of cybersecurity in the UN. We will continue these efforts to elevate cybersecurity as an essential component of the UN's international peace and security agenda. Russia has demonstrated how state-provided malicious cyber tools are used alongside conventional weapons. Russia's cyberattack against the satellite communications of Ukraine on 23 February, served to prepare and facilitate Russia's on-the-ground invasion.

Excellences,

It is our duty to ensure accountability and justice at all levels. Impunity breeds impunity and leads to new crimes to be committed. It is of utmost importance that there are independent and effective investigations into the atrocity crimes and crimes of aggression committed against Ukraine, also in Syria, Ethiopia and elsewhere. We must provide justice to victims and bring those responsible for atrocities and genocide to trial.

Estonia fully supports the investigation led by the International Criminal Court. We give most serious consideration to the establishment of an independent special court for the crimes of aggression and the compensation mechanism for the damages caused by the aggression. We support all initiatives attempting to secure accountability.

To conclude,

The war in Ukraine affects us all. It is our common duty to push back the ugly manifestations of imperialism, colonialism and racism by Russia. Russia must understand that the road they have taken is disastrous and the war they have started cannot be won. If we stop caring, if we get tired, if we fall into indifference, the aggressors and criminals will only be empowered. This is not the world where we want to live nor the world we want to leave to the future generations.

The United Nations is and remains the cornerstone of our multilateral rules-based world order. Its relevance is put to the test we cannot fail. The UN must emerge from this watershed moment stronger, more united, and more relevant than ever before.

Finally, let me assure you Estonia continues to provide humanitarian assistance to most vulnerable around the world. Our development cooperation is aimed at achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, increasing digital cooperation, to create an open and safe digital society for all. We remain a responsible and an active partner in the UN, in this crisis and beyond.