

Mr President, excellencies

First, I would like to thank all those whose daily work is dedicated to the United Nations and its ideals.

All across the globe people work in the name of the United Nations, wearing the colours and emblems of this organization, giving their effort in the pursuit of making our world a better place. Thank you.

Thank you also to those who are responsible for keeping the buildings and offices clean and ready for business. Thank you to those who make sure that technology runs smoothly, to the translators and security staff, to the diplomats of the member states, and those who are entrusted with making decisions and bearing the responsibility of managing the day-to-day operations of the United Nations.

In a large organization, each individual must do their part, and every task—no matter how mundane—is done in the name of our common cause and deserves to be done well. Everyone has a role to play, and all those roles are important.

Mr President.

This week has been dominated by discussions of the many and serious problems that humankind faces. Most of these pressing problems do not respect national borders.

We are now - more than ever in the history of mankind - in a state of mutual reliance and dependence.

The problems created by some of us, often have dire consequences for others.

A disruption in production in one part of the world impacts the well-being of people in another.

Hateful rhetoric that is used for political gain in one country can spread with the speed of light across borders and poison public discourse in another.

But, there are other and more uplifting parts of this reality.

Solutions that are discovered in any distant region of the world can be transported and utilized across the globe in an instant.

New ideas in culture, in science and in political thought don't respect any national boundaries.

Being interconnected also means that people are aware of each other's humanity.

But, sadly—at the same time when we need it the most, multilateralism is in serious crisis.

I believe that we are at a critical juncture—that when we look back at these times— 30 years from now—we will either look back with absolute sadness and horror to a catastrophe that could have been avoided, or these times will be considered a moment of strength, when the international system showed that it could withstand its toughest test without breaking apart.

We need to take the long view and contemplate how our actions today will look a few decades from now.

How leaders act and how institutions respond will determine the difference between hope and despair.

This means the United Nations, and this means us, the people who are entrusted with positions of leadership and service.

In this regard we all have a role to play, and each role is important.

Mr President.

This year marks the halfway point for the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals set out in 2015. It is estimated that only 15 percent of the SDGs are currently on track for completion by 2030.

Plainly speaking - it is halftime - and we are down by a big margin. During this week some positive steps have been taken at the SDG summit; but it will be actions, not words, that count.

Iceland presented its second voluntary national review in July. As with many others, we have a mixed story to tell. Some of our goals are on track, others are not. My government remains

committed to the timely implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030. As for most of us, the second half will be decisive.

The Paris Agreement is also in jeopardy. Over the past months, we have witnessed the increased intensity of climate change and natural disasters in the form of flooding draught and extreme weather patterns. Wildfires are battering every corner of the world. These have local and global ramifications, including increased food insecurity, poverty and hunger.

This is not just a threat to some in distant parts of the world. This is an existential threat to us all. And it is the most vulnerable, especially women and children and poorer communities, that bear the brunt of these events, that are the consequences of problems that they had no part in creating.

Mr President.

Where there is hope, it continues to be in co-operation and in a multilateral approach to solving problems.

A recent example is the historic agreement reached earlier this year on marine biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction, under the auspices of UNCLOS—our constitution of the ocean. The BBNJ agreement is a testament to the importance and effectiveness of multilateralism when it comes to tackling the triple planetary threat of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

It was an important milestone that Iceland is proud to have contributed to.

Mr President

December marks the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is a milestone worth celebrating.

The world has long since learned that when the rights of people are denied in one state, there is a real danger that the effect will be felt by others. Just as domestic violence is a societal problem, not a family matter—brutal treatment of citizens in one state of the UN is a matter that concerns us all.

Earlier this month Iceland formally presented its candidature to the United Nations Human Rights Council for the term 2025–2027.

Human rights are a key pillar of Iceland’s foreign and development policy, based on the conviction that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interrelated, interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Our candidature is endorsed by the Nordic countries.

Member states in the Human Rights Council do not have to be perfect. None of us are. We can all do better, and we should all aim to do better.

However, if member states do not live up to the values and commitments in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there need to be consequences. This is why the General Assembly rightly voted in favour of suspending Russia from the Human Rights Council because of atrocities committed in Ukraine.

Mr President.

We are seeing a serious degradation of human rights in many member states.

Women and girls in Afghanistan can’t go to school. Their basic freedoms are taken from them, and they live under cruel and violent suppression. I salute the bravery of the women, within Afghanistan and outside, who continue to bring the attention of the world to the horrors perpetuated by the Taliban.

In Iran the authorities continue to deny women freedom and punish those who dissent. We should all listen to the voices of people who put themselves in danger by openly fighting for human rights.

We are seeing degradation in the rights of LGBTI+ communities in many places.

Of all the things people choose to worry about—I simply can never understand why people should not be allowed the freedom to love and be loved for who they are.

Mr President.

The shocking treatment of women by many countries, and the blatant inequalities in even more countries, are not only a terribly sad and unfair situation for the women of those countries.

Quite frankly it makes no sense.

I come from a country that is considered to have a very strong record when it comes to gender equality. And Iceland is fortunate enough to be a society that has developed from being among the poorest in Europe to one of the most prosperous since we became an independent Republic almost 80 years ago.

The fact of our equality and the fact of our prosperity are strongly linked.

We do not have gender equality in Iceland because it is a luxury we can afford.

It is gender equality that has made us strong.

Mr President.

In Belarus opponents of the regime are jailed and exiled while the rulers align themselves with Russia's war in Ukraine. All of those who dedicate themselves to ensuring human rights and freedoms for the people of Belarus deserve to be listened to and supported.

And there are so many other places around the world where people are being punished for their opinions and for challenging authorities.

Civil society, media and freedom of speech are being undermined, not only in autocratic countries, but all over the world.

Cases of people being arbitrarily detained by governments are on the rise and are deeply troubling.

There is a trend in the direction of deterioration of democratic values and civil rights—often led by populist politicians who offer simplistic solutions to complex problems.

They spread suspicion, peddle misinformation and foster polarization in their societies.

This poses a dilemma. Those who undermine democratic norms do so under the protection of the same human rights they are attacking.

And while some of these rights are misused, it is also clear that we will need to rely on human made solutions to our human made problems. And this will rely on the creative and innovative thinking of individuals who have the freedom to express their thoughts, to challenge the status quo and to test their ideas, services and products in an open and competitive society.

Artificial intelligence asks some serious questions that will demand close multilateral co-operation to avoid the very real risk of this technology becoming a tool of destruction rather than creation.

We must also bear in mind that the promise of human rights and freedom applies to individuals and does not necessarily extend to state sponsored propaganda or artificially generated misinformation that is intended to sow discord and disunity.

Freedom of expression is for human beings, not for programmed bots that spread hate, lies and fear. Human rights are for human beings.

Mr President.

Military coups are proliferating in Africa, the situation in Sudan is deteriorating, the Taliban regime tightens the grip in Afghanistan, the military junta in Myanmar continues to commit atrocities and the conflict between Israel and Palestine frequently flairs up with the two-state solution nowhere in sight.

Russia's war of territorial aggression is not only a brutal assault on Ukraine and its people - it is also an unprecedented affront to the international system.

This madness has been ongoing for over 18 months and is the sole responsibility of a permanent member of the Security Council, which should be acting on behalf of the UN membership as a guardian of international peace and security. Instead, the Russian Federation chooses to viciously attack a neighbouring country in complete violation of the UN Charter and international law.

Iceland is proud to have been at the helm when the Council of Europe decided last May to establish a Register for Damage incurred by the Russian invasion in Ukraine. This is an important step in seeking reparations after the war and holding perpetrators to account.

Every country of the world and humankind as a whole, stands to lose if the international community allows wars of neo-colonial conquest by large powers against its neighbours.

There are many grey zones in world affairs. This is not one of them.

Russia is the aggressor and must be stopped.

Ukraine is rightly defending its land, and by extension our international system. It must be supported.

Mr President.

Mankind does not only create problems. We also create solutions, and some of these solutions border on being miraculous.

In fact—this very organization, and the system of international and multilateral co-operation of which it is both the pinnacle and foundation—is an example of a man-made solution to man-made problems.

But maintaining relevance and importance throughout many decades is no easy task. It falls to the organization itself, but more crucially to its member states, to avoid the pitfalls that put in jeopardy all organizations as they age; that they take on a life of their own, increasingly independent from their original aims.

We will need to be creative, innovative and willing to look critically at how things are done, with the aim of finding ever better ways of serving the states and people of the world.

We need reforms to the United Nations Security Council that reflect a much changed and evolved world since the institution was set up.

And we need more high-level dialogue that is open and unscripted. Where the people responsible for the making important decisions can engage with each other, exchange views.

Sometimes it is difficult to talk to people that you don't agree with. But I have never found it to be harmful.

The people of this organization, and us—people who hold positions of leadership in member states—are all human beings that benefit from being in the company of other human beings.

The United Nations must be modern and change with the times. This system—a miracle of the human spirit when it was first set up—must earn its legitimacy over and over again, as new generations replace those who hold memories of why our current world order, with all its flaws, is still vastly and completely superior to any known alternative.

We have no alternative but to adapt. We all have a role to play, and each role is important.

Failure is not an option.

Thank you.