

Speech by Prime Minister Mark Rutte at the United Nations General Assembly, 22 September 2023, New York.

Mr President,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

In 1864 Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter to Edwin Stanton, his Secretary of War. He observed that, 'You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today.'

It was a different time.
With different problems.
And different ways of solving them.

A lot has changed since then.
And yet, Lincoln's words remain as relevant as ever.
They show that 'responsibility' has always been a watchword.
Because our very future depends on whether we choose – or refuse – to take responsibility.

Today, there is no time to be lost.
There's never been so much at stake at one time.
We must combat climate change.
Fight hunger and poverty.
And protect peace and security in many places all over the world.

It's human nature to prioritise the issues that affect us most directly.
Let's be honest: that goes for all of us here today.
Every one of us has come here to discuss the issues we face in our own countries.
But if we look beyond our borders, we see that none of those issues stand alone.
All the big issues of our time intersect.
Their impact is global.

Take climate change.

Or poverty.

Or conflict.

These issues are all related, and we're all affected by them.

Though perhaps not always in the same way.

In Europe peace has been shattered by Russian aggression.

And yes, I am asking once again for your support in ending this terrible war.

At the same time, I realise that some of you are thinking:

What about our own challenges?

What about our own security?

Will you support us there as well?

I understand how you feel.

And you're right.

As the late Secretary-General Kofi Annan put it:

'If the United Nations is not as united as it should be, that is because it is a reflection of the world we live in.'

And he was also right.

For too long at the UN, some interests have weighed more heavily than others.

The United Nations is structured as if it were still 1945.

But the world has changed.

It's taken a long time for that realisation to sink in.

But once you see it, you can't unsee it.

In this world, in this time, we all need each other.

All 193 countries.

Because we all face a common task.

Consider the global distribution of wealth.

The Netherlands is not only one of the UN's most loyal development donors. We also support the reform plans of institutions such as the World Bank.

And consider climate change.

We need to reduce our footprint.

A footprint that leaves its mark on countries far beyond our borders.

So that's what we're doing.

By building a circular economy by 2050.

By making our financial sector more sustainable.

And by combating deforestation and loss of biodiversity.

In each of these areas, partnerships are essential.

Above all, partnerships with the countries hit hardest by climate change.

Today I will speak with several Small Island Developing States about climate adaptation.

About ways of exchanging knowledge, expertise and innovative solutions.

And yes, such partnerships begin with talking.

But they must go beyond words and promises.

The Netherlands is increasing its annual contribution to international climate finance to 1.8 billion euros by 2025.

And over half of that will go to climate adaptation.

You all understand how important this is.

In two months' time we will gather in Dubai to take stock of our progress towards the Paris Climate goals.

But we already know that we are way off track.

So something has to be done – right now.

The Netherlands will fulfil its responsibility.

By providing 100 million people in developing countries with access to renewable energy by 2030.

By massively scaling up our renewable energy investment.

And by helping to set up and scale up green-hydrogen corridors, together with South Africa, Egypt, Morocco, Namibia and others.

Currently, only two per cent of global investment goes to Africa, despite the huge potential there.

We have a collective interest in making sure that potential can be tapped.

Because if we don't help Africa to grow sustainably, we will all miss our climate goals.

COP28 must mark a course correction.

There, we must agree and explain how the world will get on track to meet the 1.5 degree goal.

If not, the consequences will be disastrous.

The examples I've offered of Dutch action, working together with our Kingdom partners in the Caribbean, show that we are willing to fulfil our responsibility.

That we are willing to pick up the phone.

To answer the knock at the door.

The most striking of truths is also the most obvious:

We aren't as different as we might think.

What unites us is bigger and stronger than what divides us.

I see that in my bilateral discussions.

I see it in the European Union.

And I see it here at the UN.

However different our backgrounds are,

However different our countries,

We share the same universal values.

Peace.

Freedom.

Justice.

On the 17th of July 2014 those values – which the Netherlands holds so dear – were trampled underfoot.

It was the day that flight MH17 was downed by Russia.

The day the Dutch people and people everywhere were reminded, in such a painful manner, that peace, freedom and justice are not givens, but require our constant efforts.

Those values – those collective aims – form the basis of the United Nations.

They are the reason we're here today.

With that in mind, I would like to talk about Ukraine.

Every day, millions of people feel the effects of Russia's aggression.

Above all the Ukrainian people, who are the victims of terrible crimes.

Every day they live in fear.

Am I still safe in my own home?

In my city?

Will I ever see my family alive again?

These are questions no one should ever have to ask.

In Europe we thought we'd never need to ask them again.

But we were wrong.

And so now it's up to us to respond.

To pick up the phone.

To answer the knock at the door.

We can't leave one country to fend for itself.

I know some countries are hesitating.

Asking themselves why they should get involved in someone else's war.

To them I say: it's your war too.

Because even if there's no shooting in your towns, and your cities aren't being bombed, this war affects everyone.

People in vulnerable countries know exactly what I'm talking about.
The global food supply is being used as a weapon of war and food prices are soaring.
Millions of people are being pushed back into poverty and hunger.
And it's precisely the most vulnerable countries that are being hit the hardest.
You won't find them on the official casualty list, but those countries, and the people who live there, are also victims of Putin's aggression.

Russia's conduct goes against everything that we in the UN stand for.
That alone is reason enough to take action.
The Charter of the United Nations – our common foundation – is very clear on this.
When push comes to shove, we can't neglect our duty because it's not convenient.
Because we have other things on our minds.
Or because it seems too hard.
No! No! No!

The Charter is intended for moments like these.
For a time and a place like this.
The General Assembly of the United Nations is the ultimate time and place to hold each other to account.
To remind each other of our responsibilities.
That goes for all of you, and it goes for me too.
I've explained how the Netherlands will fulfil its responsibility.
You can hold us to that, and you can call us to account for our actions.
In the same way, I'm calling on you.

Speak out against Putin and Russia's violation of the UN Charter.
Support the peace plan.
And support Ukraine.
Even if it takes time.
Even if there are setbacks.
Especially if it takes time and there are setbacks.

And tell Russia to give back the stolen children of Ukraine.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Some countries feel they are supporting peace in Ukraine simply by calling for an immediate ceasefire.
They think that this will help end the war.
That peace, freedom and security will return automatically.
They see it as an expression of nuance.
They want to see the good in others.
They don't want to point the finger of blame.

In the case of the war in Ukraine, there is no shared blame.
There is no doubt about who the perpetrator is, and who the victim.
Russia attacked Ukraine, a sovereign nation.
Not the other way round.
So there can be no 'shared' solution.
Russia is the aggressor here.
And it is not Ukraine's supporters that are prolonging the war.
It is Russia.
Putin has occupied 20 per cent of Ukraine.
An immediate ceasefire now would mean victory for Russia.
That is the reality.
And a just and lasting peace can be achieved only if we recognise that reality.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is a lot at stake here.

Putin is counting on us being divided.

He's counting on us ending our support as the war drags on longer and costs more than we thought.

He's counting on us losing interest and returning to our own problems.

This is Putin's strategy.

And now that push has come to shove, we must show that we have learned from the past.

That we will all pick up the phone.

That we will all answer the knock at the door.

That we will all fulfil our responsibility.

Thank you.