

**Minister for Foreign Affairs
Senator the Hon Penny Wong**

National Statement United Nations General Assembly

Transcript, E&OE

Location: New York

28 September 2024

President, friends –

Steeled by the horror of the most catastrophic conflict in history, humanity forged our United Nations.

Its purpose often defined not as taking us to heaven, but saving us from hell.

Yet we convene this week with so much of the human family enshrouded in darkness.

More conflict than any time since World War Two.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Sudan.

Myanmar.

Yemen.

Gaza.

And now Lebanon.

Brutal, degrading conflict ingraining hatred and division; pushing peace into the unseeable distance; and pulling neighbours into an endless, reflexive cycle of blame and retaliation.

Such entrenched violence has its own gravity: more violence becomes the path of least resistance.

Seeing past hatred is hard. Building trust is hard. Compromise is hard. Making peace is hard.

But the future otherwise is not worthy of our children and the present is not worthy of ourselves.

We must remember why we built this institution.

The UN system is where the world comes together to agree and uphold standards and rules; to protect all of the world's peoples and the sovereignty of all nations.

These rules always matter – never more so than in times of conflict – when they help guide us out of darkness, back toward light.

Back on a path towards peace, stability and prosperity.

Not long after we last gathered here, Israel was attacked by the terrorist group Hamas, which killed 1,200 people.

This was the greatest loss of Jewish life in a single day since the Holocaust, and Hamas continues to hold hostages.

It was an attack that cannot and should not be justified.

Like many countries, Australia has imposed sanctions on Hamas, its leaders and financial facilitators.

In Israel's response, more than 40,000 Palestinians have been killed.

More than 11,000 children.

Nearly two million Gazans displaced, some many times over.

More than two million facing acute food insecurity.

This must end.

Palestinian civilians cannot be made to pay the price of defeating Hamas.

All lives have equal value.

Last month we marked 75 years since the world established the Geneva Conventions – the foundations of international humanitarian law, to limit human suffering in conflict.

War has rules. Every country in this room must abide by them.

Even when confronting terrorists.

Even when defending borders.

Israel must comply with the binding orders of the International Court of Justice, including to enable the provision of basic services and humanitarian assistance at scale.

Australia shares the frustration of the great majority of countries, more than 77 years since the General Assembly adopted Resolution 181: a plan for two states side by side – one Jewish, one Palestinian.

77 years later, that Palestinian state still does not exist – long held out as the promise at the end of a peace process that has ground to a halt.

The world cannot wait.

We must all contribute new ways to break the cycle of conflict.

Earlier this year, Australia voted in this General Assembly in support of Palestinian aspirations for full membership of the UN.

We have sanctioned Israeli extremist settlers and will deny anyone identified as an extremist settler a visa to travel to Australia.

But individual country actions alone are not moving the dial.

The international community must work together to pave a path to lasting peace.

The world cannot keep hoping the parties will do this themselves; we cannot allow any party to obstruct the prospect of peace.

As I have said for many months, Australia no longer sees Palestinian recognition as the destination of a peace process, but a contribution of momentum towards peace.

Australia wants to engage on new ways to build momentum, including the role of the Security Council in setting a pathway for two-states, with a clear timeline for the international declaration of Palestinian statehood.

Because a two-state solution is the only hope of breaking the endless cycle of violence – the only hope to see a secure and prosperous future for both peoples.

To give the Palestinian people the opportunity to realise their aspirations through self-determination.

To strengthen the forces for peace across the region and undermine extremism.

A two-state solution, Israel and Palestine, is the opposite of what Hamas wants.

Hamas does not want peace, and it does not want security for the State of Israel.

Any future Palestinian state must not be in a position to threaten Israel's security.

There can be no role for terrorists. And it will need a reformed Palestinian Authority.

Right now, the suffering across the region must end. Hostages must be released. Aid must flow.

We have provided more than \$80 million in humanitarian aid to support civilians who have been devastated by this conflict.

But humanitarian aid is not a long-term answer.

It is now nearly 300 days since Australia and 152 other countries voted for a ceasefire.

Today I repeat that call.

Just as I repeat Australia's call for a ceasefire in Lebanon, and for parties to fully implement Resolution 1701. Lebanon cannot become the next Gaza.

We know Australia is not a central player in the Middle East, but we seek to be a constructive voice for peace and the upholding of international law, including the protection of civilians.

In order to protect civilians, we must also protect aid workers who deliver the food, water and medicine civilians need to survive.

Aid workers are the best of humanity. Their selfless devotion to improving the lives of others should not cost them their own.

Yet 2023 was the deadliest year on record for aid workers, and 2024 is on track to be even worse.

Gaza is the most dangerous place on earth to be an aid worker.

Australia felt this deeply with the IDF's strike against World Central Kitchen vehicles, which killed Australian Zomi Frankcom and her colleagues.

This was not a one-off incident. More than 300 aid workers have been killed since the start of this conflict.

This week, Australia has convened a group of ministers to pursue a new Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel.

The Declaration will be developed over the coming months, to demonstrate the unity of the international community's commitment to protect aid workers and to channel that commitment into action in Gaza, in Sudan, in Ukraine and in all current and future conflicts.

All countries will be invited to join the Declaration.

I want to thank my fellow ministers from Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia, Japan, Jordan, Sierra Leone, Switzerland and the United Kingdom - and the humanitarian leaders who have partnered with us in this.

As Zomi Frankcom's family said this week:

"People like Zomi are rare and their bravery and selflessness should be not only celebrated but protected. They can't be brave at any cost."

The world's peoples are counting on all of us here to rededicate ourselves to international humanitarian law, and the rest of the rules we have agreed to preserve peace and security.

Russia continues its vicious assault on the people and sovereignty of Ukraine, in flagrant violation of the UN Charter.

Aside from terrible damage and loss of life in Ukraine, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is also propelling the global crisis in food and energy security...

Raising the cost of living for working people all over the world.

This year we saw Russia end the mandate of the Security Council's Panel of Experts on the DPRK after fourteen years of unanimous support.

The DPRK continues its unlawful activities with impunity, conducting illegal arms transfers to Russia and threatening our region, including the Republic of Korea and Japan.

We are concerned that Russia is sharing nuclear and space information and technology with Iran.

Rules are being blurred, undermined, and at times, blatantly violated.

We must rally to defend these rules that protect all of us; these rules that form the character of the world that we want.

A world where Australia and other countries have the freedom to decide our own futures, without interference and intimidation.

A world where we can find collective solutions to our toughest problems.

These problems are evolving and changing, but the commitment of some states to the rules underpinning the international system has not evolved for the better.

Whether cyberattacks, interference, disinformation or economic coercion – some states circumvent the rules, putting further out of reach collective approaches to counter new and emerging threats.

Pressing challenges like climate change, technology, poverty, reform of financial architecture - and increasingly necessary peacebuilding work.

We need reform of the UN system to better serve us all.

But reform cannot become a means for disruptors to dismantle protections for smaller countries.

No state should pretend the rules don't apply to them;

Ignoring international rulings;

Using might over multilateralism;

Ruling by power alone, not by law;

Favouring impunity rather than facing accountability;

Forcing outcomes by economic coercion or military muscle, rather than on the level playing field we established so carefully.

We see some states trying to set us against each other, when the challenges demand that we come together – that we stand together in support of the security, prosperity and sovereignty of all countries.

Australia has a different vision for the world. One where no country dominates, and no country is dominated.

When disputes inevitably arise, we insist those differences are managed through dialogue, and according to the rules, not simply by force or raw power.

It's why we have consistently pressed China on peace and stability in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.

And why we have welcomed the resumption of leader and military level dialogue between the US and China.

Some countries may dismiss the rules as a Western construct. Our Asia-Pacific region tells a different story.

Take the agreement between Vietnam and Indonesia to delimit their Exclusive Economic Zone after twelve years of negotiations - an example of how long-standing maritime disputes can be resolved in accordance with international law.

Take Vanuatu's landmark International Court of Justice initiative on climate change.

Or Fiji and Solomon Islands maritime boundary agreements.

Take the Bay of Bengal Arbitration where states peacefully resolved long-standing and sensitive claims under UNCLOS: the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Or Australia and Timor-Leste initiating the first ever compulsory conciliation under UNCLOS, leading to the resolution of our maritime boundary dispute.

We see it in the Philippines' decision to go to the Arbitral Tribunal, constituted under the UNCLOS – and its unanimous, clear, ruling in the South China Sea arbitration between the Philippines and China, which is final and binding on the parties.

These cases in our region illustrate how international law has been built, defended and promoted by small and medium countries from different traditions.

The countries of our region have embedded the rules that serve us all, and we make an ongoing contribution to maintaining and promoting them.

Together we want to pursue peaceful ways to resolve disputes.

We know that this doesn't happen on its own. All of us help make it happen.

Australia is doing this by being active, by exercising agency, and by contributing our efforts to the balance of power in our region and our world.

Our candidacy for a non-permanent seat on the Security Council for the term 2029-2030 reflects our deep commitment to contributing to international peace and security.

The Security Council is a foundation of our collective peace and security. But we must reform it.

Australia wants greater permanent and non-permanent representation for Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Asia-Pacific.

This body must represent the world as it is in the 21st century.

We must also reform the peacebuilding and conflict prevention architecture. It is not working.

That will be the focus of our coming term on the Peacebuilding Commission.

Australia will support national prevention strategies in our term, essential for local peacebuilding.

We are providing additional resources and staff to the PBC's support and secretariat bodies.

And we will increase our voluntary contribution to the UN Peacebuilding Fund to \$15 million per year.

We are committed to doing all we can to de-escalate and prevent conflict.

We do this by responding when we, or our neighbours, are coerced or have sovereignty threatened.

We do this by supporting our region's security – as we did at the Pacific Islands Forum this month, when we stood side-by-side with Pacific leaders to announce a Pacific-led, Australia-backed Pacific Policing Initiative.

We do this by backing the call of Fiji's President for a cessation of ballistic missile testing in the Pacific.

We do this by combining reassurance and deterrence – by working with our friends and partners, openly and transparently, so no potential aggressor thinks the pursuit of conflict is worth the risk.

But there is so much more to do.

For peace to be truly durable it must be built by, and for, all of society.

That includes women.

Yet here, in the world's premier peace forum, only around one in ten speakers at this dais so far this week have been women.

Gender equality is a primary predictor of peace, even more so than a state's wealth or political system.

That is why Australia champions the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

We support initiatives that we know are working, like the Southeast Asia Women Peace Mediators, who link stakeholders to enhance the potential for constructive dialogue.

Like the Pacific Women Mediator's Network, a locally led, vibrant and inclusive platform to support women's political leadership.

And earlier this week, with Germany, Canada and the Netherlands, Australia invoked Afghanistan's responsibility under international law for violations of the rights of women and girls.

The Taliban have erased women from Afghanistan's self-portrait.

Effectively imprisoning half their society's population immediately halves their country's potential.

Depleting the soul and prospects of a nation.

Any country that wants to develop fully must encourage the full participation of all its people.

So we can't pursue only parts of the 2030 Agenda: we must achieve all of the Sustainable Development Goals.

And yet, with just over five years to 2030, over a third of the SDG's are stalled or regressing, and finance targets are not being met.

In times of scarcity, we need every development dollar to count.

This is why we need to strengthen the global financial architecture.

This is why Australia is backing the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index and the Bridgetown initiative.

This is why Australia is championing reforms that make Multilateral Development Banks more responsive to global shocks, and build sustainability and resilience, particularly in the smallest and most vulnerable countries.

This year, Australia committed \$AUD492 million to the Asian Development Fund, working with Japan to unlock a record \$USD5 billion in new assistance to the region's most vulnerable countries over the next decade.

Financial pressures are further strained by the trend of trade being used as a point of leverage rather than an opportunity, as economic interdependence is misused for strategic and political ends.

Nearly every country in this room depends on open trade with transparent and predictable rules.

We must keep working together to uphold these trade rules that underpin our economic growth and the livelihoods of our peoples.

Of course it's not just finance and unfair trade arrangements that threaten development.

Climate change is causing more disasters, reversing years of development gains overnight.

Extreme weather threatens food and water security, with grave implications for global stability.

Australia is acting at home, enshrining our ambitious emissions reduction targets into legislation: 43 per cent by 2030 and net zero by 2050.

We are transforming our economy.

Within this decade, 82 per cent of Australia's electricity generation will be renewable, up from around 32 per cent when I first addressed you two years ago.

We are building new industries to accelerate our economic transition and to export reliable, renewable energy to the world.

And we are acting internationally, to respond to our partners.

By the end of 2025, Australia will offer Climate Resilient Debt Clauses in our sovereign loans.

And the groundbreaking Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty entered into force on 28 August.

It is the first time two nations have recognised, in a legally binding treaty, continuing statehood and sovereignty, notwithstanding the impacts of sea-level rise.

This agreement supports Tuvaluans to live and thrive at home through land reclamation and investments in infrastructure, education and health.

At the same time, Tuvaluans have the choice to live, study and work in Australia.

'Mobility with dignity' means ensuring people have a genuine choice to stay.

Pacific voices have demonstrated sustained, clear and innovative leadership, as well as tremendous resilience.

This is why we are bidding to host COP31 in partnership with the Pacific.

We want to show the world the unique climate challenges facing our region and amplify the voices of Small Island Developing States, the custodians of our world's oceans.

President, we know that along with climate change, technology will define the multilateral system and development goals for decades to come.

We want safe, accessible technology that is used for the global good – not as a tool for censorship, surveillance, exclusion and division.

From the start of negotiations for the Global Digital Compact, Australia has advocated that all states should boost access to digital technologies that offer benefits to our world.

We know that if countries don't have digital infrastructure, they will miss out.

This is why we are building sustainable south-south connectivity, including submarine cables across the Pacific.

We also know not all knowledge is new.

First Nations' people's deep knowledge must be preserved and protected.

Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been innovators, inventors and knowledge-holders for over 65,000 years.

Whether it is firestick farming used to sustainably manage Country, or the engineering of great stone fish traps across rivers and seas.

That unbroken line of innovation has continued to this day.

Earlier this year, Australia's Ambassador for First Nations People helped bring countries together to finalise the World Intellectual Property Organization Treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge.

The treaty acknowledges the link between traditional knowledge, innovation and intellectual property.

It helps First Nations communities identify and protect the use of their knowledge by others, which will in turn spur collaboration between researchers, innovators and communities, opening up new opportunities for First Nations entrepreneurship.

This treaty is remarkable for another reason.

It serves as a source for optimism.

193 member states have agreed on new rules to the world's intellectual property system.

That is an extraordinary achievement.

As I said at the outset, the international outlook is framed by entrenched division.

Where consensus often seems a lost cause.

But we collectively moved the intellectual property system a step forward.

Just as we collectively moved forward this week with the Pact for the Future.

And these recent wins remind us of the gains we've made we that need to protect.

Of the ways our lives are better because of the United Nations.

Of the ways our world is better because of our collective contribution to the international system.

It promotes economic development and makes trade more fair – together supporting job creation, overcoming poverty, and enabling small and medium countries to resist coercion.

It guards against the spread of nuclear weapons.

It sets the standards that keep food safe.

It assigns the satellite orbits that take the internet to the most remote reaches.

It sets the standards that keep 120,000 flights and 12 million passengers safely in the sky every day.

It is resolving and preventing conflicts in 53 peacekeeping and political missions.

Each year it saves more than 350 million children from malnutrition.

And most of all – let us always remember – we are collectively descended from people who lived in a harsher, more dangerous world...

Who built this UN system to confine horrors of the past to history, and to give us a better life.

We have no option and no excuse but to find a way through our challenges today, immense and intractable as they are.

We must work together.

We must drive change where it is needed, transparently, together.

We must drive change to include all the world's peoples.

To deploy the collective agency that this forum provides, so we combat climate change, poverty and coercion...

So we negotiate peace.

President, friends –

We must not allow others to divide us for their own gain...

To dilute the protections that are inherent in the UN Charter, that are codified in the Geneva Conventions.

Rather, we have to reinforce those protections, in the interests of all states and civilians.

That is what Australia is for.

A peaceful, stable and prosperous world for all.

Where sovereignty is respected.

Where civilians are protected.

Source: <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/national-statement-united-nations-general-assembly-0>