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Speech by President Viola Amherd at the UN General Debate

Bern, 23.9.2024 - Speech by President Viola Amherd, head of the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS), at the UN General Debate, New, York, Tuesday, 24 September 2024.

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Mr President
Secretary-General
Excellencies
Ladies and gentlemen

On the morning of 3 March 2002, I put a card into the ballot box, on which I had written a determined 'yes'. Our TV screens had been filled with various forecasts and figures from the early hours.

But it was only in the evening that the final result came through: after years of struggle and a fiercely contested campaign, Switzerland would join the United Nations.

Ultimately, it was a few hundred votes from the canton of Valais – my home region – that tipped the balance.

On that day, the Swiss people expressed their country's desire to assume responsibility and take part in the world of international politics in a spirit of solidarity.

More than two decades have now passed. I am addressing you today, just a few days before Switzerland assumes the presidency of the Security Council. The world may have changed, but our principles have not.

Like many countries, we are following with concern the escalating tensions and emergence of new conflicts around the world.

Unfortunately, we are witnessing increasing levels of grave human rights violations as well as a growing, blatant disregard for internationally recognised borders. Might risks taking precedence over right, and the threshold for resorting to military force has clearly fallen significantly.

Only together can we counter the dynamic, captured so aptly by the great writer Ferdinand Ramuz a century ago: "Parce qu'un malheur ne vient jamais qu'un autre ne vienne ; les malheurs se marient entre eux, ils font des enfants."

There are major challenges ahead: wars, disasters, the damage we are inflicting on our shared environment, technological advancements and the opportunities and risks they bring.

As the only truly global organisation, the UN has a crucial role to play in tackling these issues.

We can make a start right here, if we choose to work together better – regardless of our governmental and economic structures or our cultural differences.

We must not let our world fragment into blocs. We must show our willingness to negotiate principles with all major regions of the world, principles that are in our mutual interest and respected by all. And this must always be underpinned by international law.

Excellencies
Ladies and gentlemen

The search for peace is paramount, and Switzerland is committed to playing its part.

Based on its tradition of good offices and solidarity, and because resignation and inaction should never be an option, this summer Switzerland brought together around 100 states and international organisations for the Summit on Peace in Ukraine.

Our goal was to provide an initial impetus for a just and lasting peace in Ukraine, based on international law and the United Nations Charter. The conference at the Bürgenstock marked an important step in that direction.

The 94 signatory states of the Bürgenstock Joint Communiqué reaffirmed their commitment to the principles of the United Nations Charter.

We would like to renew our invitation to the international community to spare no effort in supporting concrete measures and this Joint Communiqué.

International law is the basis for our common endeavours for global peace, security and prosperity.

The Geneva Conventions, the 75th anniversary of which we are celebrating this year, govern the legal basis of war as well as the protection of the civilian population.

But the latest UN figures paint the international community in a poor light. Civilians and civilian infrastructure are not only inadequately protected, but in fact come under repeated attack.

We are witnessing violations of international humanitarian law, from Myanmar to Ukraine, from the Middle East to Sudan. My country has been strongly committed to ensuring that the Security Council adopts ceasefire resolutions, particularly for Gaza and Sudan.

It is urgent that these resolutions are now implemented and respected. Likewise, we urgently call for an immediate return to a total cessation of hostilities on both sides of the Blue Line.

The heavy toll paid by civilian populations in these current crises and conflicts strengthens Switzerland's resolve to ensure that international humanitarian law remains an absolute priority. Pushing for greater compliance is at the heart of our work in the Security Council.

Protecting the civilian population in conflicts is neither self-evident nor guaranteed. It must be afforded higher priority in conflict situations.

Peace is and always will be the best way to protect civilian populations. To this end, Switzerland is also committed to civilian and military peacebuilding.

Even if some peace missions have been unable to meet all of their intended

objectives, they nevertheless contribute to security, stability and peace in people's everyday lives. When deciding which missions to deploy, we must overcome our disagreements. Peace is too precious a commodity to become a pawn of self-serving interests.

Together with our many international partners, Switzerland is continuing to contribute to peacebuilding as well as expanding its capacities where possible.

War and peace are not the only challenges we face. There are many others that we also need to urgently address:

Civilians not only require protection from armed conflict, but also from natural disasters, as has become increasingly clear in recent years. Climate change and loss of biodiversity are having an existential impact on ever more people.

It is crucial that we also maintain and expand our efforts in these areas, while forging ahead with pioneering developments. Many of the international environmental agreements are either not implemented at all or only inadequately. This is resulting in large-scale environmental destruction.

I am also concerned about the rise in disinformation, which undermines people's ability to form their own opinions based on facts. Private and state actors spread disinformation at home and in other states to fuel polarisation, sow distrust and destabilise states.

Switzerland has and will always be committed to freedom of expression and media freedom.

Disinformation is toxic. We can counteract this by improving our understanding of what constitutes free speech and manipulation of the facts; by exposing illegitimate interference, by fostering open and fair debate, and, in our capacities as governments and international organisations, by providing transparent and factual information.

Excellencies

Ladies and gentlemen

Switzerland has and always will be committed to strong and effective multilateralism.

All states must come together to find lasting solutions.

My country is shaped by regular democratic debate at all levels of government – local, regional and federal. We urgently need to see more of such constructive and peaceful debate if we are to address the existential challenges that face us.

Two days ago, we adopted the Pact for the Future. The pact is a strong commitment to multilateralism. One of the core elements of the pact is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – our roadmap, which we must implement together as quickly as possible.

"The idea must be born from the vision, like the spark from a flint." That too is a quote from Ramuz – one that has lost none of its relevance. We need courage and confidence.

And we need a framework in which we can work together as partners to find solutions. That framework is the United Nations. Let us work together to make it stronger.

Thank you.

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