



Statement by H.E. Ms. Thórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörð Gylfadóttir Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland

United Nations General Assembly, 79th Session,
16th Plenary Meeting, 28 September 2024.
General Debate

Mr. President, Excellencies,

First, I would like to once again 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 colors and emblems of the UN, giving their effort to make our world a better place. Often doing work that only the UN is capable of doing. And in these headquarters and other UN offices, hundreds of people show up every day to ensure that the nations of the world can count on this organization to be the forum where the biggest challenges facing humanity can be discussed, debated, and – hopefully, set on a path of resolution.

Thank you.

Mr. President,

Next year will mark the 80th anniversary of the United Nations. The UN emerged out of calamity, holding the promise of a brighter future—a promise of peaceful settlements of disputes, universal human rights, and the opportunity for all to enjoy peace and prosperity.

Despite setbacks, wrong turns, and many bad decisions, these past eighty years have indeed been the most peaceful and prosperous that humankind has experienced.

For my own nation, 1944 also marked a new beginning, with Iceland becoming a republic. Iceland's status as an independent nation has been defended not primarily by weapons or alliances but by a robust system of international law, mutually beneficial cooperation, and strong and universally respected international institutions. For us, it is paramount to safeguard this multi-lateral system.

When the UN was founded, it was a time of change and a time that demanded decisions.

It was also, it seems to me, a time of creativity in the face of destruction, a time of determination despite despair. A time for hope to triumph over horror.

By founding the United Nations, the leaders of the world's nations set a path guided by a shared vision for a peaceful and prosperous world, a faith in fundamental human rights, and the equality of nations, large and small.

But as Secretary General Antonio Guterres recently stated when speaking about the Summit for the Future, we cannot build a future fit for our grandchildren with systems built for our grandparents.

Or, in the case of a person my age, a system created for my great grandparents to build a future fit for my own generation and my children.

Mr. President,

These are also times of profound change.

All around the world, technology is fundamentally changing how people experience reality.

And, to quote Mr. Guterres again, these technologies are being developed “in a moral and legal vacuum, without governance or guardrails.”

This is no small thing. And it is not something that leaders and politicians can treat as trivial or unconnected to other policy issues.

While elected representatives and leaders debate how to address challenges that we face, while we attempt to guide our societies towards a better future – there is an ongoing battle for people's attention, convictions, and beliefs being waged through increasingly addictive technologies, often self-guided by overwhelmingly powerful and completely unprincipled algorithms.

And this battle will not necessarily be won by those who share a belief in peace and prosperity; or have faith in fundamental human rights and the equality of nations large and small.

As these staggering changes are taking place in our information environment, the world is facing the greatest number of armed conflicts since World War II, and democratic institutions worldwide are facing a loss of trust.

These developments are not happening in a vacuum.

In her address accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in 2021, Philippine journalist Maria Ressa pointed out that without facts, you cannot have truth. And without truth, you cannot have trust.

Ressa continued, “Without trust, we have no shared reality, no democracy, and it becomes impossible to deal with our world's existential problems.”

Sadly, to an ever more obvious extent, this prospect of a lack of shared reality has become fact.

Malign actors are actively undermining social order across the globe; they are spreading suspicion and fear, fueling despair and rage.

They may use technology, but their target is always the very essence of what we are as human beings.

The individual rights that have proven vital for the functioning of democratic societies are being subverted.

This is why I said in my address to this body one year ago that human rights are for human beings and that freedom of expression is not for programmed bots that spread hate, lies, and fear.

This is a challenge that we have not yet solved.

Freedom cannot exist without accountability, and, to paraphrase American historian Timothy Snyder, it must always involve some risk.

We know that sacrificing individual rights because of these risks is an unacceptable proposition, akin to burning down the house to kill a spider.

An individual – even one with questionable and dangerous opinions – has the right to be heard.

In a true democracy, we accept the risks associated with freedom of speech, but we must be careful not to let our freedom be hijacked by those who evade accountability and take no risk.

The current danger does not come from free individuals who advocate for their own misguided, crazy, or evil ideas but vast networks of both paid and unpaid agents, made-up trolls, hiding in the shadows, entirely unaccountable for their poisonous contribution to public discourse.

This sort of speech is no more a manifestation of the freedom of expression than a forced gathering to salute a dictator is an example of freedom of assembly.

Mr. President,

These are issues that exemplify the urgent need for a strong multilateral system.

However, this system cannot be left to provide answers to how to maintain itself.

The real power lies with national governments and leaders across the world.

All of us who are entrusted with positions of authority and influence in our own societies must shoulder our responsibility to maintain and strengthen a multilateral system based on the UN Charter. For this, we need more interaction, more humanity and much more unscripted interactions at the highest levels.

Mr. President,

Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, Sudan's civil war, and the devastating conflicts in the Middle East all rage on while other longer-running conflicts grow protracted. One thing that all have in common is that innocent civilians bear the highest cost.

By invading Ukraine and violently seizing its territory, the Russian Federation has committed a flagrant breach of the UN Charter and derogated from its primary obligations as a Permanent Member of the Security Council to uphold international peace and security.

The Russian Federation's repeated threats of using nuclear weapons are reckless and dangerous.

In the case of the Russian Federation's actions, there should be no doubt who is in the right and who is in the wrong.

It is Mr. Putin who has concocted a false narrative around his invasion of Ukraine's territory. It is he who started this senseless war. And it is in the Kremlin's power to end it at any time by withdrawing its forces from all the territory that is internationally recognized as belonging to Ukraine.

The Russian Federation's disdain for the principles of the UN Charter is on full display in Ukraine, but it is also pervasive in many other parts of the world with ongoing insidious efforts to subvert democratic norms and incite violence and chaos.

Mr. President,

Israel's right to exist is beyond debate.

Iceland condemned, in the strongest terms, the horrific attack on Israel on October 7th. We continue to call for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

But no country is above the law, and the Palestinian people's right to self-determination is also beyond debate.

In the current conflict, the world has witnessed limitations of humanitarian aid, water, and power to Gaza. This is unacceptable.

There have been reports of civilian infrastructure and hospitals being used for purposes that can deprive them of their protection under international humanitarian law. This is also unacceptable.

And, we have witnessed unacceptable losses of civilian lives – children, aid and health care workers, journalists, and UN staff.

And journalists are being denied access to the war zone and silenced.

Iceland condemns all violations of international law, including international humanitarian law. International law provides states with rights *and* obligations. Both are sacred.

Again, we call on all parties to agree to an immediate ceasefire and avoid any action that could lead to further escalation. A clear political path to peace must follow a ceasefire, entailing the establishment of two states living side by side in peace and security.

With that aim, and as confirmed by the International Court of Justice, Israel must immediately cease all new settlement activities and bring its unlawful presence to an end.

Our worst fears, of an escalation, have now been realized with the bloodiest days that Lebanon has seen in years. And still, we must brace ourselves for even worse, with the conflict spiraling further out of control. The parties have been warned of the cost and the danger of this development. It must stop. For the sake of humanity.

Mr. President,

In ten days, the General Assembly will convene to elect 18 new members to the United Nations Human Rights Council for the term 2025-2027. Iceland is a candidate in these elections, hoping to serve for a second time on this important body.

We submitted our candidature out of a deep conviction that respect for human rights and the rule of law, justice, and fairness are key to a prosperous society.

Mr. President,

In his opening address to this assembly on Tuesday, Secretary-General Guterres pointed out that less than 10% of all speakers this week would be female. In our estimate, I am one of only 19 women speaking from this podium during the opening session. I thought we had come further than this.

But of course, I am truly one of the lucky ones.

Mr. President,

It is beyond my comprehension that there exist in this world, in these enlightened times, societies of human beings where little girls and women are not allowed to go to school.

That there exists in this world of ours a society where little girls are not allowed to laugh in public, and women are not allowed to take part in conversations outside the confines of their homes.

A teenage girl in Afghanistan who sings a happy song in public runs the risk of being arrested, of being humiliated, of being ostracized – of being beaten – or even worse.

Mr. President,

How has the world come to this?

This is why Iceland supports the cross-Regional action announced this week here in New York to hold the Taliban to account for their grave violations of CEDAW.

Mr. President,

Those whose sexual orientation differs from the common norm are suffering backlash, too.

While we have thankfully seen a significant shift toward decriminalization of consensual same-sex relations, we are also witnessing laws adopted to establish or expand criminal sanctions contrary to the basic universal norms that all States have agreed.

I do not understand why people should not be allowed the freedom to love and be loved for who they are. Increased individual freedom and happiness should never worry politicians or governments that have real problems to solve.

I am proud to confirm that if elected to the Human Rights Council Iceland will include LGBTI+ rights among list of priorities during our term on the Council.

Mr. President,

Iceland strongly emphasizes global actions against climate change, both mitigation and adaptation. Climate change is not a distant threat; it is a reality already impacting the lives and livelihoods of millions of people.

Climate change threatens the health of the ocean, which Iceland is highly dependent on. A healthy ocean and a healthy planet are matters of economic prosperity and well-being.

One of the many meetings I attended this week was a high-level meeting on sea level rise, which strongly indicates that our ocean environment is destabilizing. This is yet another challenge we must address – and we believe that only through more determined climate change mitigation can we limit the effects of sea level rise.

Taking on this challenge, as well as ensuring that respect is shown for rules and regulations that we have agreed to abide by concerning our behavior at sea, is of great importance to a nation like Iceland that relies heavily on the ocean around us. The United Nations has a proven record in this arena, primarily with the Convention for the Law of the Sea, a particularly important agreement in our view and all maritime nations.

Therefore, it is of great concern that the law of the sea is being challenged and undermined, including in the South China Sea. We call on all member states to honor their commitments and act in accordance with the law of the sea.

Mr. President,

We must work together for a more stable and prosperous world, and Iceland is set on contributing more to sustainable development. Our recently adopted policy for international development cooperation supports this with the overarching goals of poverty eradication, respect for human rights, and improved living standards. It foresees a significant increase in official development assistance.

Given our own experience, we will continue our firm focus on gender equality, women's empowerment, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and eradicating gender-based violence. Crucially, we will increase our efforts to strengthen civil rights and improve social and legal protection for LGBTQI+ persons.

It falls on all of us to support the vital work of the United Nations and other partners in addressing the dire status of humanitarian affairs. The number of refugees and internally displaced persons has never been higher as increasing levels of fragility know no geographical boundaries.

Mr. President,

We are meeting at a time when the multilateral system is under the greatest pressure it has faced since the establishment of the United Nations.

Meanwhile, it is abundantly clear that without multilateralism, without international cooperation, and without the respect for international law the downward spiral of crises and conflict will only accelerate.

The adoption of the Pact for the Future offers an encouraging sign, a collective recognition that it is only together that we can work for a better world - and that we need new tools in these times of change.

The choice is ours: either we take on the responsibility to guard the foundations of multilateralism, the UN Charter, and international law, or we succumb to a world of "might makes right," which surely will only lead us to disaster.

The choice is clear:

We must work together to protect and promote the fundamental principles and values underpinning the vision of the UN's founders and on which this great organization is built.

We must ensure that the UN system—including the Security Council keeps up with the times and reforms and adapts to changing realities. Taking this step will require courage and strong political will.

Mr. President, over and beyond, we must recognize that the world needs the United Nations more than ever before and that we cannot and must not fail to make our organization the best possible version of itself.

The multilateral system deserves to be defended in the same spirit of creativity, under the same promise of hope and with the same steadfast determination – that guided the hands of those who brought this organization into existence almost 80 years ago.

I thank you.