

Speech by Prime Minister Dick Schoof at the United Nations General Assembly, 26 September 2024, New York

Mr President,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I stand before you as a proud new participant in what, for many of you, is now a familiar gathering.

Those words not only describe my own role, but say something about the very essence of the UN.

For each of us, our presence here is only temporary.

Some are here a long time.

Others for only a brief period.

But everyone's time here, is defined by their own, individual era.

Today, again, we embody that long tradition.
Today, again, we come together to work towards goals whose size and scope exceed our present reach.
Today, again, each of us is staying the course.
And when our time is at an end, we will pass the baton to the next generation.

This is not to say that our course is always clear and never needs adjusting.
On the contrary.
Our world is changing fast.
And unfortunately, in some ways not for the better.
War and conflict in so many places.
Climate change, whose effects are becoming clearer by the day.
And cyber threats we couldn't have imagined a few years ago.

That is what I want to talk about today: anticipating an unknown future.
And I should add: although the challenges of our time may be new, my message is not.

It was clear to the Romans, more than two thousand years ago, when Cicero wrote:

It is the duty of every statesman to anticipate the future, to discover some time in advance what may happen, whether for good or for ill. And never to have to say 'I had not thought of that.'

Of course, predicting the future is not a simple matter.

And I don't believe that's what Cicero meant.

I think he was calling on us to take responsibility.

Responsibility that goes beyond the scenarios we want to imagine.

Beyond our national borders.

And above all, beyond short-term solutions.

It may seem impossible.

But here, more than anywhere, we know better.

The history of the UN has shown time and again what can be achieved if we join forces and persevere.

Without the UN, there would have been no climate agreements.

No disarmament treaties.

No development goals or international tribunals.

We have come a long way.

And we can still go much further.

By finding, in this unpredictable world, our strength in stability.

By returning to the very foundation of the United Nations: a shared sense of responsibility.

To preserve that foundation, we must strengthen and improve our partnership.

For example, by moving forward in the challenging reform debate.

You won't be surprised to hear me say that the UN Security Council no longer reflects the realities of the 21st century.

The seats must be divided better geographically.

To preserve the UN's legitimacy, strength and vitality.

With permanent African representation at the very least.

This is a task for us all.

And so the Kingdom of the Netherlands will fully support proposals that make such reforms possible.

In other areas, too, we must adapt much more quickly to the new reality.

Because, while war and conflict are as old as time, the manner in which we wage them is always changing.

And words we have used since the dawn of memory, are no longer sufficient.

Words like 'war' and 'peace'.

Everyone knows what they mean.

But the world is no longer black and white.

In recent years we've been confronted with something that seems neither one nor the other.

More and more countries are developing offensive cyber programmes.

And these pose a growing threat to our critical infrastructure, our security, our earning capacity and our intellectual property.

These are big challenges, which force us to prepare for the future.

We can't easily predict that future.

But we can try to anticipate it.

And that's exactly what we're doing.

With the UN Pact for the Future we have taken big steps in the right direction.

From reforming our international financial architecture, to tackling issues of cybersecurity and outer space.

Surely we can attribute this success to our shared desire to work towards a fair and secure life for everyone.

For people today, and the generations that follow.

With that in mind, I'm proud of the Declaration on Future Generations, a key tool for achieving this goal, which was co-facilitated by Jamaica and the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

This kind of broad international collaboration is what the UN is all about.

And with every issue we tackle together, we increase our effectiveness.

We need only look at climate change to see the importance of that.

There are still countries that think this issue doesn't concern them.

Because they've been spared the direct effects so far.

But that is an illusion.

From flooding to drought: the effects of climate change are impacting people around the world.

That includes parts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

And not least the Small Island Developing States.

Countries where the rising sea level is not just a future threat, but a current reality.

What's more: all the problems caused by climate change amplify each other.

So climate change is not limited to those countries that are directly affected.

In truth, every country is directly affected.

And therein lies the key to our approach: cooperation.

Of course, that means committing to the climate targets of the Paris Agreement, the SDG's and the measures we agree at COP29.

But it also means using each other's knowledge and know-how.

The Netherlands has a long history of managing water.

Today we use that experience around the world.

We contribute our expertise on food security and countless other challenges, as they arise.

At the same time, we also face issues that will always demand our attention.

Issues as old as the UN itself.

Protecting human rights, defending democracy and promoting the international legal order.

There are so many countries where these values are under pressure.

In Venezuela, for example, people are demanding that their voices be heard.

To them I say: we hear you.

We hear your call for a democratic transition.

Today, on this stage, I urge us not to forget those voices.

And that's just one example.

There are many more countries that feel forgotten.

Who wonder why the world is not paying attention to their suffering.

Their day-to-day reality is also one of war, hunger and poverty.

Take Sudan, where 25 million people are facing acute hunger.

We cannot close our eyes to this.

We cannot turn away.

We have a duty to listen.

And to take action.

Earlier this year the Kingdom of the Netherlands made an extra 10 million euros available, bringing its contribution to the crisis response in Sudan and surrounding countries to 80 million euros.

But as we all know, that is just a drop in the ocean.

I could run through a long list of other countries that need our help and support.

I could try to describe their suffering.

But I could never do it justice.

You know as well as I do, the places where war and conflict are raging.

In Europe, for a long time we thought that we no longer needed to worry about human rights, peace and security.

We thought that they were a given.

But we were wrong.

Very wrong.

Some of you may be thinking, 'Not Ukraine again.'

But we need to address this.

Because the victims of this Russian war are not limited to Ukraine alone.

This war affects everyone.

As people in vulnerable countries know all too well.

Since the global food supply has been deployed as a weapon of war,

millions of people have been pushed back into hunger and poverty.

They too are the victims of Russia.

So to anyone still in doubt I would say:

This is not only a war between Russia and Ukraine.

It is a war of aggression against everything that we in the UN stand for.

The Charter of the United Nations, the very basis of our partnership, is clear on this subject: no state may use force against the territorial integrity of any other state.

And although it is up to Ukraine to set the conditions for a just and lasting peace, we cannot leave the responsibility of achieving that in practice to them alone.

Ukraine deserves our help and support at every stage of the process.

That means arranging and participating in a new dialogue on finding a path to peace.

It means challenging those countries who support Russia's defence industry or help it circumvent sanctions.

And it means calling Russia to account for its actions.

There can be no impunity for its flagrant violations of the Charter.

The Netherlands is fully committed to restoring justice for Ukraine.

Yes, it is a process that will require great stamina.

But that is something we have in abundance.

We have the time, the patience and the resources.

For example, there are the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice.

Two pillars of accountability, based in my own city, The Hague; the international city of peace and justice.

I don't need to tell anyone here how important it is for these institutions to be able to do their work freely and independently.

And that too is our collective responsibility.

While we're on the subject of collective responsibility, there is unfortunately another major conflict that demands our attention.

Almost a year has passed since October the seventh.

Almost a year since the terrorist organisation Hamas committed its atrocities, and war broke out in Gaza.

The suffering since then has been extreme.

Far too many innocent civilians have been killed, abducted or wounded.

Far too many people have been forced to flee, and have lost their loved ones and their property.

In the past few days there have been a large number of civilian casualties in Lebanon.

And countless others in the region could face the same fate if the violence continues.

That cannot be allowed to happen.

A major regional war must be prevented at all costs.

And so must any new attack on Israel.

That begins with supporting international diplomatic initiatives, such as the proposal by the United States and France for a temporary ceasefire, which is supported by many countries, including in the region.

We call on Israel and Lebanon to support this plan:

Give diplomacy a chance.

I know that when it comes to Israel and Gaza, people quickly revert to their entrenched positions.

Entire generations have grown up full of mistrust, fear and even hate towards the other side.

But if we try to take a longer view, we will see that there are no winners in this war.

And any suggestion of 'winning' for one side, amounts only to a loss in the end.

Loss on both sides.

That's why political leadership and courage are needed now.
On both sides.

To break the endless cycle of violence and help them see 'the other' for who they are:

People in search of a safe place to live.

A place to live alongside each other, instead of at odds with each other.

The first steps are obvious.

An immediate ceasefire.

The immediate and unconditional release of all remaining hostages.

Rapid, large-scale aid for the people of Gaza.

And all parties must comply with international law.

I know it sounds easy.

And I know that simply wanting something is not the same as making it happen.

But, as Nelson Mandela said, 'It always seems impossible until it's done.'

Ladies and gentlemen,
Our history has always shown us that it is possible.
We have come a long way.
And we still have a long way to go.
But the path that lies behind us, can also show us the way
forward.
As long as we hold on to what we believe in:
Our shared values.
Our common course.
And above all: our ability to persevere.

Thank you.