

UNITED NATIONS



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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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ADDRESS TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

New York, 24 September 2024

Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our world is in a whirlwind.

We are in an era of epic transformation – facing challenges unlike any we have ever seen – challenges that demand global solutions.

Yet geo-political divisions keep deepening. The planet keeps heating.

Wars rage with no clue how they will end.

And nuclear posturing and new weapons cast a dark shadow.

We are edging towards the unimaginable – a powder keg that risks engulfing the world.

Meanwhile, 2024 is the year that half of humanity goes to the polls – and all of humanity will be affected.

I stand before you in this whirlwind convinced of two overriding truths.

First, the state of our world is unsustainable.

We can't go on like this.

And second, the challenges we face are solvable.

But that requires us to make sure the mechanisms of international problem-solving actually solve problems.

The Summit of the Future is a first step, but we have a long way to go.

Getting there requires confronting three major drivers of unsustainability.

A world of impunity – where violations and abuses threaten the very foundation of international law and the UN Charter.

A world of inequality – where injustices and grievances threaten to undermine countries or even push them over the edge.

And a world of uncertainty – where unmanaged global risks threaten our future in unknowable ways.

These worlds of impunity, inequality and uncertainty are connected and colliding.

Excellencies,

The level of impunity in the world is politically indefensible and morally intolerable.

Today, a growing number of governments and others feel entitled to a “get out of jail free” card.

They can trample international law.

They can violate the United Nations Charter.

They can turn a blind eye to international human rights conventions or the decisions of international courts.

They can thumb their nose at international humanitarian law.

They can invade another country, lay waste to whole societies, or utterly disregard the welfare of their own people.

And nothing will happen.

We see this age of impunity everywhere -- in the Middle East, in the heart of Europe, in the Horn of Africa, and beyond.

The war in Ukraine is spreading with no signs of letting up.

Civilians are paying the price – in rising death tolls and shattered lives and communities.

It is time for a just peace based on the UN Charter, international law and UN resolutions.

Meanwhile, Gaza is a non-stop nightmare that threatens to take the entire region with it.

Look no further than Lebanon.

We should all be alarmed by the escalation.

Lebanon is at the brink.

The people of Lebanon – the people of Israel – and the people of the world cannot afford Lebanon to become another Gaza.

Let's be clear.

Nothing can justify the abhorrent acts of terror committed by Hamas on October 7th, or the taking of hostages – both of which I have repeatedly condemned.

And nothing can justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people.

The speed and scale of the killing and destruction in Gaza are unlike anything in my years as Secretary-General.

More than 200 of our own staff have been killed, many with their families.

And yet the women and men of the United Nations continue to deliver.

I know you join me in paying a special tribute to UNRWA and all humanitarians in Gaza.

The international community must mobilize for an immediate ceasefire, the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, and the beginning of an irreversible process towards a two-State solution.

For those who go on undermining that goal with more settlements, more landgrabs, more incitement -- I ask:

What is the alternative?

How could the world accept a one-state future that includes such a large number of Palestinians without any freedom, rights or dignity?

In Sudan, a brutal power struggle has unleashed horrific violence -- including widespread rape and sexual assaults.

A humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding as famine spreads. Yet outside powers continue to interfere with no unified approach to finding peace.

In the Sahel, the dramatic and rapid expansion of the terrorist threat requires a joint approach rooted in solidarity - but regional and international cooperation have broken down.

From Myanmar to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Haiti to Yemen and beyond – we continue to see appalling levels of violence and human suffering in the face of a chronic failure to find solutions.

Meanwhile our peacekeeping missions are too often operating in areas where there is no peace to keep.

Instability in many places around the world is a by-product of instability in power relations and geo-political divides.

For all its perils, the Cold War had rules.

There were hot lines, red lines and guard rails.

It can feel as though we don't have that today.

Nor do we have a unipolar world.

We are moving to a multipolar world, but we are not there yet.

We are in a purgatory of polarity.

And in this purgatory, more and more countries are filling the spaces of geopolitical divides, doing whatever they want with no accountability.

That is why it is more important than ever to reaffirm the Charter, to respect international law, to support and implement decisions of international courts, and to reinforce human rights.

Anywhere and everywhere.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Rising inequalities are a second driver of unsustainability and a stain on our collective conscience.

Inequality is not a technical or bureaucratic issue.

At its heart, inequality is a question of power with historic roots.

Conflict, climate upheaval and the cost-of-living crisis, are pushing those roots deeper.

At the same time, the world has not recovered from the surge in inequalities caused by the pandemic.

Of the world's poorest 75 countries, one-third are worse off today than they were five years ago.

During that same period, the five richest men in the world have more than doubled their wealth.

And the top one per cent of people on earth own 43 per cent of all global financial assets.

At the national level, some governments are supercharging inequalities by doling out massive tax giveaways to corporations and the ultra-rich, while shortchanging investments in health, education and social protection.

No one is being short-changed more than the world's women and girls.

Excellencies,

Rampant gender-based discrimination and abuse are the most prevalent inequality across all societies.

Every day, it seems we are confronted by yet more sickening cases of femicide, gender-based violence and mass rape, both in peacetime and as a weapon of war.

In some countries, laws are being used to threaten reproductive health and rights.

And in Afghanistan, laws are being used to lock-in the systematic oppression of women and girls.

And I am sorry to observe that despite years of talk, gender inequality is on full display in this very Hall.

Less than 10 per cent of speakers during this week's General Debate are women.

This is unacceptable – especially when we know gender equality delivers for peace, sustainable development, climate action and much more.

That is precisely why we took targeted measures to achieve gender parity among the United Nations senior leadership.

It's doable.

I call on male-dominated political and economic establishments around the world to do it.

Excellencies,

Global inequalities are reflected and reinforced even in our own global institutions.

The United Nations Security Council was designed by the victors of the Second World War.

Most of Africa was still under colonial domination.

To this day, Africa has no permanent seat on the world's preeminent council of peace.

This must change.

So must the global financial architecture, set up 80 years ago.

I commend the leaders of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for taking important steps.

But as the Pact for the Future emphasizes, tackling inequalities requires accelerating reform of the international financial architecture.

Over the past eight decades, the global economy has grown and transformed.

The Bretton Woods institutions have not kept pace.

They can no longer provide a global safety net – or offer developing countries the level of support they need.

Debt interest payments in the world's poorest countries now cost more, on average, than investments in education, health and infrastructure combined.

And around the world, more than 80 per cent of Sustainable Development Goal targets are off track.

Excellencies,

Getting back on track requires a surge of financing for the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement.

That means G20 countries leading on an SDG Stimulus of \$500 billion a year.

It means reforms to substantially increase the lending capacity of Multilateral Development Banks and enable them to massively scale-up affordable long-term climate and development finance.

It means expanding contingency financing through recycling Special Drawing Rights.

And it means promoting long-term debt-restructuring.

Excellencies,

I have no illusions about the obstacles to reform of the multilateral system.

Those with political and economic power – and those who believe they have power – are always reluctant to change.

But the status quo is already draining their power.

Without reform, fragmentation is inevitable, and global institutions will become less legitimate, less credible, and less effective.

Excellencies,

The third driver of our unsustainable world is uncertainty.

The ground is shifting under our feet.

Anxiety levels are off the charts.

And young people, in particular, are counting on us and seeking solutions.

Uncertainty is compounded by two existential threats – the climate crisis and the rapid advance of technology -- in particular, Artificial Intelligence.

Excellencies,

We are in a climate meltdown.

Extreme temperatures, raging fires, droughts, and epic floods are not natural disasters.

They are human disasters -- increasingly fueled by fossil fuels.

No country is spared. But the poorest and most vulnerable are hardest hit.

Climate hazards are blowing a hole through the budgets of many African countries, costing up to five per cent of GDP – every year.

And this is just the start.

We are on course to careen past the global limit of a 1.5 degree temperature rise.

But as the problem gets worse, solutions are getting better.

Renewable prices are plummeting, roll-out is accelerating, and lives are being transformed by affordable, accessible clean energy.

Renewables don't just generate power. They generate jobs, wealth, energy security and a path out of poverty for millions.

Developing countries cannot be plundered in that journey.

Our Panel on Critical Minerals has recommended fair and sustainable ways to meet global demand for these resources, which are essential to the renewables revolution.

Excellencies,

A future without fossil fuels is certain. A fair and fast transition is not.

That is in your hands.

By next year, every country must produce an ambitious new national climate action plan – or Nationally Determined Contributions.

These must bring national energy strategies, sustainable development priorities, and climate ambitions together.

They must align with the 1.5 degree limit, cover the whole economy, and contribute to every one of the COP28 energy transition targets.

An International Energy Agency report released today breaks this down.

By 2035, on average, advanced economies must slash energy emissions 80 per cent, and emerging markets 65 per cent.

The G20 is responsible for 80 per cent of total emissions.

They must lead the charge – keeping with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities in the light of different national circumstances.

But this must be a joint effort -- pooling resources, scientific capacities and proven and affordable technologies.

I'm honoured to be working closely with President Lula of Brazil – who is both G20 Chair and COP30 host – to secure maximum ambition, acceleration and cooperation.

Finance is essential.

COP29 is around the corner.

It must deliver a significant new finance goal.

We also need a Loss and Damage Fund that meets the scale of the challenge – and developed countries meeting their adaptation finance promises.

And we must finally flip the script on a crazy situation:

We continue to reward polluters to wreck our planet.

The fossil fuel industry continues to pocket massive profits and subsidies, while everyday people bear the costs of climate catastrophe – from rising insurance premiums to lost livelihoods.

I call on G20 countries to shift money from fossil fuel subsidies and investments to a just energy transition;

To put an effective price on carbon;

And to implement new and innovative sources of financing – including solidarity levies on fossil fuel extraction – through legally-binding, transparent mechanisms.

All by next year.

Those who shoulder the blame must foot the bill.

Polluters must pay.

Excellencies,

The rapid rise of new technologies poses another unpredictable existential risk.

Artificial Intelligence will change virtually everything we know -- from work, education and communication, to culture and politics.

We know AI is rapidly advancing, but where is it taking us:

To more freedom – or more conflict?

To a more sustainable world – or greater inequality?

To being better informed – or easier to manipulate?

A handful of companies and even individuals have already amassed enormous power over the development of AI – with little accountability or oversight.

Without a global approach to its management, artificial intelligence could lead to artificial divisions across the board – a Great Fracture with two internets, two markets, two economies -- with every country forced to pick a side, and enormous consequences for all.

The United Nations is the universal platform for dialogue and consensus.

It is uniquely placed to promote cooperation on AI – based on the values of the Charter and international law.

The global debate happens here, or it does not happen.

I welcome important first steps.

Two resolutions in the General Assembly, the Global Digital Compact, and the recommendations of the High-Level Body on AI can lay the foundations for inclusive governance of AI.

Let's move forward together to make AI a force for good.

Excellencies,

Nothing lasts forever.

But a feature of human life is that it appears otherwise.

The current order always feels fixed.

Until it is not.

Across human history, we see empires rising and falling; old certainties crumbling; tectonic shifts in global affairs.

Today our course is unsustainable.

It is in all our interests to manage the epic transformations underway; to choose the future we want and guide our world towards it.

Many have said that the differences and divisions today are just too great.

That it is impossible for us to come together for the common good.

You proved that's not true.

The Summit of the Future showed that with a spirit of dialogue and compromise, we can join forces to steer our world to a more sustainable path.

It is not the end.

It is a start of a journey, a compass in the whirlwind.

Let's keep going.

Let's move our world towards less impunity and more accountability less inequality and more justice ... less uncertainty and more opportunity.

The people of the world are looking to us – and succeeding generations will look back on us.

Let them find us on the side of the United Nations Charter ... on the side of our shared values and principles ... and on the right side of history.

Thank you.