

The UN's Millennium Assembly

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Introduction

The concept of "time" has fascinated mankind for centuries -- virtually every culture handles time in its own way and so it is not surprising that there would be significant differences over its meaning and measurement in the world today. Consider, for example, that the year 2000 coincides with the year 2544 on the Buddhist calendar, the year 1420 on the Moslem calendar, and the year 5760 on the Jewish calendar. Yet despite these differences, people everywhere are increasingly directing their attention to the remarkable coincidence of the impending transition not just to another century, but also to the dawn of a new millennium. Events such as these fire the imagination.

Regardless of one's culture or calendar, there is therefore some merit in taking advantage of this preoccupation with the millennium to reflect on the course of human events, to assess the current state of the world, and to contemplate the challenges that lie ahead.

The UN has been preparing for this event for about two years. These efforts will culminate in the convening of the 55th Session of the General Assembly on 5 September 2000, a session that will be called the "Millennium Assembly of the United Nations." I will describe some of the preparations leading up to this event. I will also identify some of the issues likely to be addressed on this occasion, including the subject of disarmament which is my own particular responsibility at the United Nations.

Steps Toward the Millennium Assembly

To the best of my knowledge, Secretary-General Kofi Annan first coined the notion of a Millennium Assembly on 14 July 1997, when he submitted his "Program for Reform" to the UN General Assembly setting in motion what he has called a "quiet revolution." He proposed that this assembly should be accompanied by a summit at which heads of government could come together to articulate a vision for the new millennium, and agree on a process for fundamental review of the role of the United Nations. The report also urged the convening of a "People's Millennium Assembly" -- later called the Millennium Forum -- involving representatives of civil society. Elsewhere, the report called for the establishment of a special ministerial commission to consider possible changes in the UN Charter and related treaties, to improve the UN's ability to pursue its goals in the years ahead.

On 9 December 1997, the Secretary-General submitted an addendum noting that while numerous other activities pertaining to the millennium would be underway around the world, the Millennium Assembly could serve as a culminating event or focal point for all these activities. The basic purpose, in his words, would be "to articulate a vision for the United Nations as the world enters the new millennium." The addendum re-emphasized the importance of the participation by heads of state and government at the Millennium Summit.

The idea clearly found a receptive audience in the General Assembly. On 19 December 1997, the General Assembly adopted without a vote a resolution that, among other things, urged the Secretary-General to elaborate further on his proposals for a Millennium Assembly and Forum.

The Secretary-General responded on 31 March 1998, when he submitted a Note to the General Assembly describing further the four elements of his proposal: the Millennium Assembly, the Millennium Summit of heads of state and government, the ministerial Special Commission, and a Millennium Forum involving non-governmental organizations from civil society. The collective challenge, he said, was "to articulate and affirm an animating vision for the United Nations in the new era." He recommended that the Summit adopt the theme of the "United Nations in the Twenty-First Century" and urged participants to address such issues as the expectations of Member States about what roles the UN should play, what goals it should adopt, and, and how the UN should interact with other international organizations, groups in civil society, and global markets.

He further proposed to submit a report by midsummer 2000 elaborating on the Millennium Assembly's theme. This report would be based on close consultations with Member States, regional hearings involving both governmental and non-governmental participants, deliberations between specialized agencies in the UN system, and consultations within the UN's Administrative Committee on Coordination. He recommended that the Millennium Assembly assess the extent to which the present constitutional framework governing the various UN agencies is sufficiently flexible to adapt to the new challenges ahead. The special ministerial commission could, if the General Assembly so wishes, serve as an arena for such deliberations.

On 17 December 1998, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 53/202, which designated the 55th Session of the General Assembly as "The Millennium Assembly of the United Nations." As an integral part of this assembly, the resolution also registered a decision to convene a Millennium Summit, and called on the Secretary-General to develop an overall theme.

Events were soon moving quite quickly. On 18 March 1999, the General Assembly received a Note from the Secretariat describing preparations for the Millennium Assembly and associated events. The Note stressed that the Millennium Assembly and Summit should not be mere celebratory events, but "extraordinary forums to debate and generate international momentum on substantive challenges facing the world in the new millennium." The Note proposed a series of "regional hearings" -- global town meetings, so to speak -- that would be held in Beirut, Addis Ababa, Geneva, Bangkok, and Santiago in 1999. The Bangkok hearing, incidentally, just opened today. All of these would involve informal consultations involving government and non-governmental participants on five issues: peace and security; economic and social affairs; development cooperation; humanitarian affairs; and human rights.

On 10 May 1999 -- after extensive consultations both inside and outside the UN -- the Secretary-General formally submitted his recommendation to the General Assembly that the theme for the Millennium Summit should be "The United Nations in the Twenty-First Century." He further proposed a number of sub-topics, first of which would be "peace and security, including disarmament." The other topics included development, human rights, and strengthening the United Nations. The report stressed that the Summit should provide "a moral recommitment to the purposes and principles laid down in the Charter" as well as "spur new political momentum" for international cooperation on issues of concern to all people.

The General Assembly adopted another resolution (53/239) on 8 June setting 5 September 2000 as the specific date on which the 55th session would open. The resolution also decided that the Millennium Summit would begin the day after.

As of today, three regional hearings have been held -- in Beirut, Addis Ababa, and Geneva. These hearings have reflected considerable interest in some common themes, including the importance of addressing problems associated with weapons of mass destruction; alleviating poverty; reforming the UN Security Council; improving human rights; strengthening partnerships between the UN and the private sector; and pursuing not just the creation of global norms but also ensuring their effective implementation and compliance.

In offering today this brief review of developments leading up to the Millennium Assembly, I do not mean to divert attention from many significant events that will be taking place outside the UN system. I cannot even begin to list them all today -- since they involve virtually all dimensions of civil society, as well as national, regional, and international organizations. Nevertheless, I would like to point out that the Inter-Parliamentary Union is organizing a meeting in late August of all the presiding officers of the world's parliamentary assemblies -- they will meet in the General Assembly. A truly extraordinary year lies ahead.

Taken together, it is quite apparent that the focus of all these events is rightfully on the people of the world -- *their* problems, *their* hopes and aspirations, and *their* potential contributions in solving the collective problems of mankind.

The Key Challenges

As I noted earlier, the focus of these UN millennium-related activities will be on meeting five challenges: peace and security; economic and social affairs; development cooperation; humanitarian affairs; and human rights. Progress in these areas is crucial because they address real interests and ideals of people all across the globe. The UN's agenda is not the agenda of any one country, bloc of countries, alliance, economic grouping, culture, or lobby - to the contrary, it is a people-based agenda that is truly planetary in scope. In a sentence, the participants at next year's UN millennium deliberations will be exploring ideas and articulating concrete proposals about how we -- the people -- can better achieve the full promise of the Charter.

Of the five challenges, it is appropriate to list peace and security first, only because progress on all the other challenges facing the UN would be jeopardized if the world community's fails to address this key issue. Indeed, wars involving the use of nuclear or biological weapons could even endanger entire nations, if not the very basis of life on earth. Though armed conflicts involving conventional arms *between* countries have become quite rare, conflicts *within* countries tell a different story. According to the UN Development Programme, of the 61 major armed conflicts fought between 1989 and 1998, only three were between states and the rest were civil conflicts, which we know are particularly hard on civilian populations, especially women and children.

Our chances for success in alleviating such threats will depend upon the quality of our knowledge about the roots of conflict as well as upon the level of resources and political will we are able to devote in addressing such factors. The Millennium Assembly will consider various ways of improving the UN's capabilities to resolve conflicts through preventive action -- a term that encompasses diverse diplomatic initiatives aimed at the peaceful settlement of disputes, activities that include fact-finding, mediation, the deployment of UN peacekeepers, and disarmament, a subject to which I will return shortly. We must not just build upon existing global norms for conflict resolution, but work to expand those norms and improve our ability to ensure compliance. Under the Charter, the UN Security Council has a specific mandate to maintain international peace and security - how it will perform this responsibility in the turbulent years ahead will, I expect, figure prominently in deliberations in all the millennium forums.

With respect to the second and third sets of challenges -- in the fields of economic and social affairs and development -- the UN will continue to serve as a focal point of efforts to meet these challenges equitably on behalf of all countries. This role is all the more important in an age of "globalization," a process that potentially offers many material benefits to mankind, but that is also generating new "problems without passports," as the Secretary-General once put it - problems that transcend national controls, like drug-trafficking, organized crime, and terrorism.

Profound economic challenges also lie ahead, particularly for developing countries. The UNDP's recent "Human Development Report," for example, shows a familiar but disturbing pattern of growing disparities between rich and poor -- both between and within countries. The report notes that the assets of the world's three richest people are now greater than the combined gross national products of all least developed countries and their 600 million people.

In the eyes of many, what we have here is a global system that appears to place profits ahead of people, a system leading to alienation, distrust, and new sources of conflict in the world. The millennium deliberations offer an occasion to re-assess the full gamut of past development initiatives, to abandon or repair tools that have not worked as expected, and to cultivate some new approaches. I expect to hear new calls for enlightened codes of conduct for international trade and investment and, more broadly, new efforts to encourage a dialogue among people of different cultures religions in order to cultivate what the Secretary-General has called "a common global ethic."

The fourth challenge relates to preventing human rights abuses - whether by governments or by groups or individuals within countries. The challenge here is to fortify the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - which just commemorated its 50th anniversary last year -- and relevant provisions of the Charter with concrete initiatives in law and policy. One of the twentieth century's most precious gifts to citizens of the twenty-first century may well be the creation of an International Criminal Court - an achievement that owes a lot to efforts arising from civil society. It will now fall to citizens and their leaders in the next millennium to ensure that this Court fulfills its promise to be a bulwark against individuals who commit genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

As people become more closely linked by commerce, shared access to information, and travel, countries will find it increasingly difficult to hide their gross human rights abuses behind a curtain of secrecy. Global awareness is a necessary basis for global action -- and the UN will be exploring new ways to detect, prevent, and ultimately rectify human rights abuses wherever they may occur, and regardless of who may be engaging in them.

The fifth challenge to be addressed by the Millennium Assembly concerns international cooperation in humanitarian assistance, including relief after both man-made and natural disasters. Civil conflicts in the 1990s have reportedly forced some 50 million people to flee their homes -- that is about 1 out of every 120 people on earth. In 1997 alone, natural disasters killed some 13,000 people and caused \$30 billion in economic losses -- such losses are typically borne by countries that can least afford them. Here as in other areas, the UN will continue to provide assistance when help is beyond the capacity of national authorities alone. And here as in other fields, information technology will assist the UN's relief efforts in the next millennium -- it is already making steady progress in making available early-warning systems for dealing with natural disasters. Yet information must also be backed with both resources and political will. Countries that are working hard to alleviate poverty, to control population growth, and to protect their natural environments have proven better able to cope with such disasters than those that are not.

None of the problems I have just addressed will be easy to solve. Yet countries will, I predict, turn more

and more to the UN for assistance simply because they will have little choice. The UN's universality, its legitimacy as an institutional voice and conscience of all people, its convenience as a forum for deliberation, and its accumulated expertise and institutional memory -- these are just some of the key attributes making the UN increasingly indispensable to its Member States, especially those in the developing world.

The most important single challenge facing the UN is in mobilizing and sustaining such support. There is no substitute for political will, a factor that will be no doubt influenced in the years ahead by efforts throughout civil society, including in the field of disarmament.

The Challenge of Disarmament

Though the very first objective identified in the Preamble of the UN Charter is "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war," and though the first purpose of the UN identified in Article I is "to maintain international peace and security," the Charter has relatively little to say about the specific problem of disarmament. The Charter is, lest we forget, a pre-atomic document that was signed about two months before the atomic detonations at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Nevertheless, Article 11 of the Charter does give the General Assembly the responsibility to consider "principles governing disarmament". Article 26 made the Security Council responsible for establishing "a system for the regulation of armaments," and Article 47 gave its Military Staff Committee the task of advising the Security Council on such regulations "and possible disarmament." Under Article 99, the Secretary-General may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.

One key administrative reform was the re-establishment in 1998 of a Department of Disarmament Affairs. This is significant because it created a focal point of the UN's diverse activities in this important field and helps to underscore a priority. In the last year, we have been active in advising the Secretary-General on disarmament issues involving both weapons of mass destruction -- that is, nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons -- and conventional weapons ranging from heavy armour to small arms. We assist delegations of Member States during the meetings of the General Assembly and the First Committee. We host educational symposia on weapons-related issues for UN missions and the public. We organize major international conferences for the purpose of deliberating the current status of relevant disarmament treaties, such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Ottawa landmines convention. And we also maintain a web site open to the public with current databases and other material relating to global disarmament developments.

Our department is of course monitoring quite closely preparations for the Millennium Assembly. It is significant that the Secretary-General identified the subject of "disarmament" as a recommended subtopic for the Millennium Summit in September 2000. In preparing his report to the Millennium Assembly, the Secretary-General will receive advice from both his Advisory Board on Disarmament and the Department of Disarmament Affairs.

Disarmament will be a difficult subject at the Millennium Assembly for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the process of nuclear disarmament remains at a standstill. The Start II treaty has still not entered into force. Well over 30,000 nuclear weapons remain in arsenals around the world. Countries possessing such weapons continue to maintain and elaborate doctrines of nuclear deterrence to rationalize the possession and possible use of such weapons. And I hardly need remind this audience about the eleven declared nuclear weapon tests last May in our own neighbourhood. Second, many key disarmament treaties -- including the Chemical and Biological Conventions -- fall short of universal membership. Third, compliance issues perennially arise with all the key disarmament treaties, issues that have in recent years arisen particularly in the Middle East and East Asia. Fourth, some key lethal weapons are subject to very little international control -- such as long-range missiles, fighter bombers, and small arms. Fifth, the missile proliferation threat has spawned another threat, namely the global proliferation of missile defence systems that will lead to new incentives for both nuclear weapons and missile proliferation, not to mention the potential weaponization of outer space.

In addition to these substantive issues are a variety of administrative and procedural problems that must be addressed in the years ahead. The vast potential of the UN's disarmament machinery -- which includes not just my department but also the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, the UN Disarmament Commission, the Advisory Board on Disarmament, the UN Institute for Disarmament Research, and regional disarmament centres on three continents -- remains under-exploited by the world community. Many Member States have been working hard to convene a fourth UN Special Session of the General Assembly on Disarmament to deliberate such issues, but the consensus necessary to convene such a session continues to prove elusive.

Meanwhile, the problems persist. Men, women, and children are dying in large numbers due to largely unregulated trade in small arms and light weapons. The technology needed to manufacture weapons of mass destruction continues to spread globally despite the valiant efforts of many countries to address this threat. Countries both rich and poor are celebrating -- rather than abjuring -- the possession of nuclear weapons. In such a climate, many countries are tempted simply to give up on both nonproliferation and disarmament and to focus their efforts just on the problem of defence and deterrence. Effectively, such a development would mean the gradual eclipsing of disarmament as a collective good and its replacement by various doctrines which share a common ethic of "might makes right," quite a far cry from the values of the Charter.

Conclusion

I cannot accept that this is the future that lies ahead for international peace and security and I remain cautiously optimistic that a more enlightened approach will prevail.

Just nineteen weeks from now, a significant new day will appear on the calendar. This will be a time of great introspection not just within the UN but for billions of people throughout the world community in civil societies everywhere. Collectively, we should use this occasion -- if no other -- to look back on the past, assess our current predicaments, deliberate the many possible fates that may lie ahead for

humanity, and strive to accomplish what will be in the best interests of all.

The support that the UN Association of Sri Lanka has consistently given to the United Nations as an institution -- and to the principles of its Charter -- is but one example of what will be needed worldwide in the years ahead to sustain development, to sustain disarmament, and to sustain progress on achieving all the other fundamental goals which the United Nations has pursued since its creation. I salute your interest and look forward to celebrating with you a very peaceful and prosperous era to come.