

Press encounter with General Assembly President Jan Eliasson

8 May 2006, New York

Unofficial transcript

President Eliasson: Thank you for your active interest in the General Assembly... We have just passed a resolution on "Investing in the United Nations," which deals with administrative and budgetary matters, a resolution that was passed in the Fifth Committee by a vote. This resolution was also passed with a vote in the plenary. I would now say that we leave this debate behind us and we look to the future.

We have a period ahead of us where we will wait for the reports of the Secretary-General in accordance with this resolution. We will deal with those in the ACABQ and then in the Fifth Committee, hopefully in a constructive and positive spirit. We will also continue the work which is proceeding well and on schedule on the mandate review. This work is going very well. And thirdly we are looking into the different issues related to the review of oversight and accountability in the Organization.

I found the atmosphere today a positive one. We confirmed the discussions going on for some time in the Fifth Committee, but I would say that the spirit in this hall was a forward-looking one, a positive one. We know that there are some divisive issues. We know that there were attempts to find consensus in the Fifth Committee. I think generally now we are united in establishing that reform of the United Nations, in terms of Secretariat and management reform, is a common challenge. It is not for one particular group or another. We all have a common interest in a strong and effective UN.

I think this came out in this debate, and we are hopefully now entering a new stage of going back to the consensus tradition of the Fifth Committee, and that the plenary will be able to confirm decisions which have been [reached] by consensus.

I thank you for your attention, and I'll take your questions if you have any.

Q: Mr. President, isn't this really a setback for reform and for the main reform proposal made by the Secretary-General? And also it represents a looming budget crisis at the end of June -- [inaudible] real significant progress can't be made within the pretty short time left.

President Eliasson: I think this reflects in a way that what you have been faced with -- and I have been faced with particularly as President -- is one of the most ambitious reform packages ever put forward in the United Nations, including in the area of management and Secretariat reform. It turned out that some of these proposals were difficult to deal with, and different countries parted company. But I think it goes back to the fact that we had a higher degree of ambition than we normally have in the UN. And that means that you face situations like this. I am pretty sure, though, that we will proceed now in a positive spirit on these issues that I just mentioned and achieve considerable

steps forward so that we don't need to come to that position you are worried about – and we are worried about – namely, a budget crisis in June.

Q: Mr. President, speaking of reform, tomorrow the General Assembly is set to vote on the Human Rights Council and some of the candidates include Saudi Arabia, Iran, Cuba, Venezuela. Does that represent real reform in the Human Rights Council?

President Eliasson: I think I would rather pass on those questions in detail until the Human Rights Council election has taken place. But let me tell you that the United Nations is a reflection and mirror of the world as it is. This is also the case on the issue of the Human Rights Council. What I find very interesting and important, though, is that any member that will be elected to the Council will have to subject its human rights record for review during its term of office. That is an interesting aspect. And secondly, every country that has presented its candidature has also made pledges and commitments, which are out there in the public on the website for you to read.

Q: On the management reforms, Mr. President, the 50 countries that voted against this resolution feel very strongly that this is a setback for reform, for the Secretary-General's recommendations. The 121 that voted "yes" feel differently, of course, and think that their action is necessary to maintain the *status quo*, more or less. What's the President's take on this? The GA is very heavily divided. Do you believe this is a setback for reform?

President Eliasson: You could also turn this around: If you had had a more lukewarm, more modest proposal in terms of reform, if the Secretary-General had proposed a less ambitious programme, we would have perhaps achieved that consensus. But here was a serious effort to raise the bar and ask for more, and you saw the reaction from the Member States.

I would have hoped, of course, that we would have achieved consensus in the Fifth Committee. I was in contact every day, while I was in Nairobi on mission for the United Nations, to see whether we could reach consensus.

But now we are where we are. I think the reports that are expected by the Secretary-General in the next weeks or so, going through the ACABQ and Fifth Committee – hopefully in the spirit that I understood as positive – could be steps forward. And Ambassadors Akram and Ambassador Rock are doing a great job in the mandate review, which is also equally important. And the fact that we have behind us the Human Rights Council, the Peacebuilding Commission, the Central Emergency Response Fund, tomorrow the elections for Human Rights Council -- in spite of the turmoil in the world, in spite of the atmosphere which is somewhat strained, we have actually achieved results. So altogether I hope we will come to a situation in June where we can proceed and let the work of the United Nations continue.

Q: [inaudible] the months and years of work on the human rights issue that this vote is now taking place, have you given any consideration to asking the Security Council to

cancel the Sudan, Iran and Middle East matters, so that attention could be focused on here. Or would you delay your action for a day?

President Eliasson: My powers are limited to the General Assembly, so I cannot influence the agenda of the Security Council. I would hope that you find a method, in the journalists' corps, to clone yourself tomorrow afternoon or early Wednesday, when we have the results for the Human Rights Council.

It is an historic decision. We have worked enormously hard on this Human Rights Council. I think we should be proud of that Human Rights Council, because if we hadn't made it, as I said to you several times, we would have opened up a Pandora's box and been stuck in negotiations for a long time. And we would indeed have taken the risk of making the human rights issue a North-South issue if we hadn't finished these negotiations.

Several of you might have views on who gets elected, but this is a body of democratic decision making. And I think we should recall what I said earlier: that every member of this Council will have its human rights record reviewed. And every member which gets elected should be compared to the pledges and commitments that they have made in the campaign to get in there.

Q: On another issue, the GA is now involved in a campaign to open up the process for selecting the next Secretary-General. Do you see any progress on this campaign?

President Eliasson: It's an interesting development that I welcome. The Security Council has contacted the President of the General Assembly during the months of March and April. The Presidents of the Security Council have informed the President of the General Assembly about the discussions generally on the Secretary-General selection. This hasn't happened in the past. We expect such contacts every month from now on. And we have received information that I have passed on to the ad hoc working group on revitalization of the General Assembly, and there is a growing interest among the Member States of the General Assembly to be involved in the selection of the Secretary-General.

As you know, Article 97 of the UN Charter says it is the General Assembly that appoints the Secretary-General, upon the recommendation of the Security Council. And this is taken seriously by several members of the General Assembly.

I welcome this new dialogue that we are having, and we hope this dialogue will be intensified.

Q: Are you going to talk to the P5 on this campaign?

President Eliasson: I have been in contact with individual members, but primarily through the Presidents of the Security Council for March and April. Today I had a meeting with the President of the Security Council for May, the Ambassador of Congo,

and he told me that he would come back to me at the end of the month or during the course of the month, when the discussions on the Secretary-General [selection] have proceeded in the Security Council.

Thank you very much. Thanks for your attention. We'll go back now to have the resolution* passed on the Peacebuilding Commission, which has taken some time. I hope we will have this passed without a vote.

* [Resolution on procedures for election of General Assembly members for the Organizational Committee of the Peacebuilding Commission. Adopted without vote.]