

An aspiration to a larger freedom

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(Op ed, Financial Times, London, 21 March 2005)

For most Financial Times readers, March 21st is the first day of spring. I take that as a good omen, since today I shall be presenting my report “In Larger Freedom” to the UN General Assembly. I hope this will mark a new beginning for the international system, and for the UN itself.

Some will find that a surprising and pretentious statement from an organization they see as part of an obsolete world order, which anyway had little to do with freedom.

Yet the words “in larger freedom” are taken from the preamble to the UN Charter – whose opening words, “We the peoples”, I used as the title for my Millennium Report five years ago. In both cases I wanted to remind the governments of the world, who put me in my job and to whom I am accountable, that they are in the United Nations to represent not themselves but their peoples, who expect them to work together for the aims set out in the Charter.

These aims can be summarised as peace, human rights, justice and development – but in 1945 that last word was not yet as fashionable as it is today. The actual words of the Charter are “to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom”.

By that magnificent phrase our founders clearly implied both that development is possible only in conditions of freedom, and that people can only benefit from political freedom when they have at least a fair chance of reaching decent living standards. But “larger freedom” can be taken as embracing the other aims too. You can be truly free only if you are secure from war and violence, and if your fundamental rights and dignity are upheld by law. Human rights, development and security are mutually interdependent, and taken together they add up to larger freedom.

They also form the three main planks of a UN platform which can definitely have global appeal today – simple, readily understandable aims, which clearly matter to ordinary people, whether they are citizens of London or New York fearing another terrorist attack, or shantytown dwellers or villagers in Latin America and Africa where hunger, disease, desertification and civil conflicts seem the more immediate threats.

Of course, the UN often falls short of these noble aspirations, since it reflects the realities of world politics, even while seeking to transcend them. But political freedom has been making its way in the world, as first the peoples of Asia and Africa won their freedom from colonialism, and then more and more peoples shook off dictatorship, asserting their right to choose their own rulers.

Twenty years ago it was almost unthinkable for the UN to take sides between democracy and dictatorship, or seek to intervene in the internal affairs of its members.

Today, by contrast, almost all UN members accept democratization as something desirable, at least in theory, and the UN itself does more than any other single organization to promote and strengthen democratic institutions and practices around the world. In the last year alone it has organized or helped organize elections in over 20 countries – often at decisive moments in their history, as in Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq and Burundi. The UN’s member states can now agree, if they so decide, to increase that

assistance, and to make the international machinery for defending human rights more effective and credible. In my report I shall propose to them a way to put human rights on a par with security and development in the renewed UN.

Sixty years of peace and economic growth in the industrial world have also given the human race today, for the first time ever, the economic and technical power to overcome poverty and its attendant ills. And, thanks in large part to a series of UN conferences, culminating in the summits at Monterrey and Johannesburg in 2002, there is also very broad agreement on what needs to be done. The UN's "Millennium Development Goals", with their daring promise to halve extreme poverty by 2015, have become a kind of manifesto for newly enfranchised poor people throughout the world.

There is no longer any excuse for leaving well over a billion of our fellow human beings in abject misery. All that is needed is some clear decisions, by the governments of both rich and poor countries.

Five years ago, peace and security seemed more within our reach than development. Terrorist attacks, and bitter disputes over Iraq, have since made that much more doubtful, and we continue to face vicious conflicts in several parts of Africa. But crisis can breed opportunity. The existence of common threats makes nations more aware of the need for collective responses. Decisions can, and should, be taken to strengthen our common defence and action against terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, organized crime, sudden world epidemics, climate change, recurrent state collapse, civil war and genocide.

The UN is a forum where sovereign states can work out common strategies for tackling global problems, and an instrument for putting those strategies into effect. But it can be a much more effective instrument if its governing body, the General Assembly, is better organized and gives clearer directives to us in the Secretariat, with the flexibility to carry them out, and holds us clearly accountable for how we do it. The Security Council, for its part, needs to be more broadly representative, but also more able and willing to take action when action is needed.

I shall today propose decisions in all these areas, and challenge world leaders to respond with action at the UN summit in September. By then, in the northern hemisphere, autumn will be approaching. But if world leaders rise to their responsibilities, the rebirth and renewal of the United Nations will be just beginning – and with them, renewed hope for a freer, fairer and safer world.

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