

United Nations Nations Unies

THE PRESIDENT OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

LE PRESIDENT DE L'ASSEMBLEE GENERALE

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Statement of H.E. Mr. Julian Robert Hunte, President of the 58th Session of the General Assembly, at the Global Peace and Tolerance Awards 2003 of the Friends of the United Nations

Madam Mistress of Ceremonies, Excellencies, Honorees, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honoured to have been invited by the Friends of the United Nations to address this special Awards Ceremony. I believe it is especially meaningful that you have chosen to commemorate World Tolerance Day on this date, December 10th, which is also Human Rights Day, the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted unanimously by the General Assembly in 1948.

We have all been moved by the death of the late High Commissioner for Human Rights, Sergio Vieira de Mello, who with 21 other United Nations staff members died on 19 August 2003 while serving as the Secretary General's representative in Baghdad. I believe that it is fitting that your organization has decided to pay special tribute to his memory. Mr de Mello's own dedication to advancing the cause of human rights, and therefore of tolerance between peoples, was manifested in his work on behalf of the United Nations.

Mr. de Mello's final mission, for which he and his colleagues gave their lives - to help the people of Iraq reconstruct their lives and their country - was a direct response to the call made on us all in the Preamble to the Charter. It is a call to save mankind from the scourge of war, and to reaffirm faith in the dignity and worth of the human person. The Charter goes on to list three of the prime means for achieving these goals. The first of these is "to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours." So, right in our founding document, "tolerance" is given primacy as a way to achieve the objectives and purposes of the United Nations. It is deeply regrettable therefore, that far too often "tolerance" is regarded as a mere "wishy-washy" word for a rather passive virtue.

On the face of it, living together in peace with one another as good neighbours would not seem to be an unbeatable challenge. Indeed, it is far less daunting than achieving economic justice or decolonization must have been in 1945. But it has proven, if anything, to be even more difficult. Particularly in recent times, intolerance in many parts of the world, between ethnic groups and between the adherents of different religions or political groupings, has grown to murderous levels. It is reported that in the years since 1990, over three and a half million people have died as a result of civil wars and ethnic violence. This is more than 16 times the number killed in wars between States in the same period.

These instances of internal strife, of course, put unbearable strain on resources and stifle the development of conditions needed for urgent tasks like the eradication of pandemic disease and the alleviation of poverty and hunger. In fact, they exacerbate the problems. For too many of the world's people, social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom increasingly become seemingly unattainable goals.

The Charter charges us to employ international machinery to promote the social and economic advancement of all peoples. Each and every one of the fifty-eight years of our Organization and our Specialized Agencies tells the story of our efforts to devise and develop this machinery.

The two Covenants on Human Rights, and international treaties, among them Conventions on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Discrimination against Women, and on the Rights of the Child as well as initiatives for people with disabilities, all represent our collective effort to set standards. Member States must accept and observe these standards.

To date, our response to the sensitive issue of enforcement of the standards we have set has been to establish oversight committees for each treaty. The work that these Committees do in reviewing the situation and making observations and recommendations in their respective areas of concern, though limited in scope, is invaluable. Notably, this approach has achieved two distinct and significant objectives. It has, firstly, focused attention on problem areas and secondly, has highlighted obligations for which governments may be held accountable.

In the months since I assumed the Presidency of the General Assembly, I have been struck by how many of the items on our agenda relate to human rights concerns and, in particular, are underpinned by issues surrounding tolerance and intolerance. We have adopted many of the resolutions arising from these issues year after year. Consequently they have assumed an almost ritualistic quality.

We are currently exploring ways of making the General Assembly's work more effective and efficient. As we do so, we are mindful that we must seek to reach agreement on how we address these issues so as to affirm their importance for the people we represent. We, who are the United Nations, all have a stake in this process.

How then can we ensure the implementation of standards so as to prevent the brutal conduct resulting from intolerance that has characterized our time? How can we, as individuals, as members of civil society, and not least as governments, most effectively work to advance tolerance?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights which we commemorate today as a key aspect of Human Rights Day, gives us a measure of guidance. For it puts the issue of promoting tolerance squarely in Article 26, which deals with education. Article 26 enjoins us that education "shall promote tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace."

While each year we proclaim our commitment to the Universal Declaration, one needs no more than a quick reading of a newspaper or a glance at the nightly television news to show just how far we - all of us - have strayed from these standards.

I believe that our duties as individuals begin at home. Coming as I do from a small island nation, St Lucia, I can say that the tolerance that exists among our people was bought at a bitter price. Rising above our long history of colonialism and slavery, we have indeed learned to live together as good neighbours. Tolerance, therefore, is a characteristic we have learned by living example. Today, we are strong advocates of education as an important and effective means of promoting tolerance - in the classroom, in places of worship, in the workplace and in the community. We believe that tolerance is itself the key to peace.

As an organization of civil society you, the Friends of the United Nations, have a responsibility to use your influence and resources for the greatest impact in support of the organisation. Your mission statement includes a commitment to the active promotion of tolerance. I know you will not be silent where you find shortcomings. I know that you will point to specific areas and call for concrete action to help our United Nations to find practical solution to problems of tolerance and other violation of human rights.

As the saying goes, the struggle continues. Tonight, your Global Peace and Tolerance 2003 Awards recognize stalwart workers in the struggle for global peace and tolerance. I extend my sincere congratulations to the honorees, former President Wahid of Indonesia, Mr Aptsiauri of the Republic of Georgia, and Dr Steckel of Milestones Project. I am especially pleased that the Government and people of Bermuda, an Associate Member of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), are also being honoured for their principled stance in respect of global peace and tolerance. There are an abundance of challenges for us all to meet. You, the honorees, are being recognized for rising to that challenge.

To our hosts - the Friends of the United Nations - I would say, continue to promote and strengthen friendship with this organization. For today, more than ever, the United Nations needs good friends. Let us devise concrete and achievable ways to translate our friendship into action so that we may play our roles in upholding the principles and purposes and achieving the goals and objectives of the Charter.

I thank you.