

16 September 2008

**Statement of Mr. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann,
President of the 63rd Session of the General Assembly,
upon assuming the presidency of the 63rd session of the General Assembly**

Dear friends,
High-level representatives of the 192 Member States of the United Nations,
Mr. Secretary-General,

I come before you today fully aware of the complexity of the responsibility I assumed in accepting the presidency of this sixty-third session of the General Assembly, which you have so generously entrusted to me. Despite the relative insignificance to which the General Assembly has been relegated in recent years, I firmly believe that the task of presiding over this Assembly is an important one.

It becomes even more significant when this post is used as an opportunity to transform the prevailing exclusionary logic of selfishness, one which has, at times, crippled the ability of this body to fulfil its mandate as enshrined in the United Nations Charter.

Left unchecked, this logic can only lead to the death and extinction of our species. The perverse logic of selfishness must be replaced with the logic of love, of inclusiveness, of “we” and “our”, of solidarity. The struggle for the full acceptance of the logic of solidarity in both our Organization and our Member States will be the principal endeavour of this presidency.

The state of our world today is deplorable, inexcusable and, therefore, shameful. What Tolstoy denounced as “mad selfishness” explains why, as trillions of dollars are spent on wars of aggression, more than half the world’s people languish in hunger and destitution. Our priorities, sisters and brothers, could hardly be more confused.

All of us, without exception, share responsibility for the state of our world. While some are undoubtedly more responsible than others, there is no point in arguing over our varying degrees of responsibility. What is important now is that we look to the future, learning from our past mistakes, and together embark wholeheartedly on the task of building a new and better world, in the conviction that Another World Is Possible.

The situation in which our world finds itself is even more serious today than it was 63 years ago when the United Nations was founded. Nevertheless, we are not fatally condemned to continue sinking in the morass of mad, suicidal selfishness.

To escape from this morass, we have only to recognize that we are all sisters and brothers, and to recognize, as well, that this truth demands that we change our way of thinking, behaving and

interacting with one another. At this point in the odyssey of our human existence, our interdependence and inherent mutuality remains the central truth. Our acceptance of that truth and of its logical consequences will determine whether coming generations will have a decent future.

Love prompts us to take action in the construction of a more just and nonviolent world, with solidarity as its most important feature. We must do so without looking back or holding onto resentments. We need reconciliation with all those who might have caused us pain and suffering. If we cannot forgive, we will not be deserving of life. We will have opted for hate and rancour, which lead only to destruction and death.

In addition to the capacity to forgive, we must all rediscover our role as stewards of planet Earth. Little by little, we humans, especially those of us in the West, have rebelled against our vocation of stewardship, our reason for being. We have increasingly turned into arrogant landlords, believing that we have absolute rights over what has been entrusted to our care and management for the good of all.

This is the suicidal madness in which we find ourselves. Wake-up calls, whatever their form and no matter how brotherly their spirit, always make some people uncomfortable. However, in view of the dangerous excesses of human behaviour, these wake-up calls are imperative. Our basic problem is an ethical problem. Simply stated, we are not treating each other or the natural world as we should.

My call for us to embrace the supreme law of love, without exceptions or exclusions, for the sake of present and future generations, is made on the understanding that what gives meaning to human existence is the never-ending process of more and more dedication to the service of our fellow beings and to universal solidarity. In this process of transformation, all religions and ethical-philosophical systems can and should help us.

Although for me, personally, the paradigm of a life-giving and redemptive behaviour is in the Cross, I am convinced that all of us, in our respective religious, cultural and ethical-philosophical traditions, find strong grounds for and summons to embrace the logic of love and solidarity. We must all jointly endeavour to turn this summons to solidarity into the main propelling force for Humanity and for the United Nations. Love for each other and for our Earth should ground our mutuality and guide our collective activity.

At this difficult time for Humanity, our Organization has a major role to play and an obligation to perform better. The central and overarching objective of this sixty-third session of the General Assembly will be to democratize our United Nations. In so doing we will ensure that the United Nations maintains its place as the world's most important and indispensable Organization for achieving the levels of peace and security that our peoples are so rightly demanding of us.

I am aware of the great expectations which the vast majority of the dispossessed inhabitants of our threatened planet have placed in the United Nations to bring them peace, security and to defend their right to life and to full development. We must not fail them. It was most of all for the dispossessed of the world that I took up the challenge of presiding over this sixty-third session of the General Assembly. It is to them — to all our sisters and brothers on this Earth — that I dedicate my presidency.

We must unite our efforts, with all the seriousness that the task requires, to meet their expectations. I trust that I can count on all of you to give me your most generous cooperation. On behalf of Nicaragua and the entire Latin American and Caribbean region, my extended homeland, I thank you for your confidence.

Hunger, poverty and high oil and food prices. Various crises of great scale — economic, financial, environmental, humanitarian and legal — are converging in the present world food crisis. These crises express themselves in the current turbulence and distortions of credit markets, subsidized oil prices, the rise in world food prices, and rising prices in general, and are further aggravated by economic stagnation.

Each one of these crises interacts with and upon the others, aggravating exponentially a deterioration of the world economy. While there are many who strive to minimize the gravity of the current crisis, the truth is that we find ourselves before a global economic upheaval of unprecedented magnitude. As a result, today we are in serious danger of suffering setbacks in the fight against hunger and poverty, including the Millennium Development Goals to reduce extreme poverty.

At the root of the problem of world hunger is the unequal distribution of purchasing power within and between countries. Rather than concentrate on increasing food production as the single solution, the central focus of our efforts should be on the reduction of the inequalities in our world's food production system.

If we are to deal effectively with the problem of hunger, Governments will need to undertake the courageous decisions this crisis requires of them, including reorienting their own national priorities, transcending local and national confines to take into account the greater good and the well-being of the world's poor.

We must demonstrate a readiness to tackle even the most sensitive and contentious of issues. This means addressing, for example, the market distortions caused by the agricultural subsidies of developed countries; the impact of speculation in futures markets on food production and food sovereignty; the impacts of climate change on food production and the environment; and the multiple impacts of the production of biofuels on food availability and the environment; and lastly, but not least, the problematic development model pushed upon developing countries by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

The General Assembly, in addition to determining real needs in terms of the types and amounts of international cooperation required, will have to meet the challenge of fostering strong feelings of solidarity in order to awaken the necessary political will among all our Member States, if we are to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger from this Earth.

During this sixty-third session we will examine the immediate and root causes of the world food crisis, and its impact on world hunger and poverty. And for this reason, I welcome the declaration of the Ministerial meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement held in Tehran this past July, calling for a meeting

at the highest level to deal with the theme of food security and to identify immediate and longer-term actions on this specific crisis.

It is also imperative that we deal with the root causes that limit the institutional capacity of our own General Assembly, such as:

- (a) non-observance of the principles and standards laid down in the United Nations Charter;
- (b) the growing tendency to deprive this General Assembly of any real power;
- (c) the reduction of the Economic and Social Council to a peripheral body; and
- (d) the transfer of ever more power to the Security Council and the Bretton Woods institutions, as well as other international finance and trade institutions in general.

In other words, it is precisely in the lack of democracy within our Organization where we find the most profound cause for the most serious problems in our world today.

Democratization of the United Nations. Without question, a United Nations enriched by genuine input from all its Members would make our Organization the ideal forum for dealing effectively with the world's most pressing problems and to prevent a few from imposing upon the majority prescriptions that only make matters worse. For this reason, we have concluded that it has become imperative to hold a High-level Dialogue on the Democratization of the United Nations. At this sixty-third session of the General Assembly, we will hold this dialogue in three five-day sessions.

The first session will concern the indispensable coordination of the Bretton Woods and other international finance and commerce institutions with the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly.

The Bretton Woods institutions were established for the very purpose of addressing the inequity of extreme poverty and helping to rebuild the world economy. But all too often they have been used to impose ill-advised prescriptions that have only made the problem of poverty worse. While they are not United Nations bodies in the strict sense, the Bretton Woods institutions are among the specialized agencies referred to in Articles 57 and 63 of the Charter that are to be brought into relationship with the Organization on terms defined by agreement with the Economic and Social Council.

Both the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are basically controlled by the United States and Europe. Both institutions have been and continue to be used as instruments of domination. The world resents this and this situation must change. The necessary democratization of these international financial institutions requires a change in the share system and the system for electing the respective Boards of Directors.

The second session of this High-level Dialogue of the General Assembly will be devoted to a discussion of the revitalization and empowerment of the Assembly itself through the transfer to this body of the power wrongly accumulated in the Security Council, the Bretton Woods institutions and even, believe it or not, in the bureaucracy of our Organization.

At the United Nations, the word “democracy” is becoming increasingly empty, with no real meaning or substance. Take for instance, the 45-year-old United States embargo against Cuba. Even with a majority as overwhelming as 184 votes to 4, this patently unjust and universally repudiated embargo remains firmly in place. If the opinion of more than 95 per cent of the membership of the United Nations can be so casually ignored, of what use is this General Assembly? This is a question that deserves some thought. How can we be content to say that we have democracy simply because we have the “one nation, one vote” rule? What good are votes if they can be ignored or have no real consequence?

In any event, it is clear that we must wholeheartedly embrace the universal call for a strengthened and empowered General Assembly, which can only be achieved through the democratization of the United Nations. We know that fighting the powers that be has never been easy, but we also know that the future of the United Nations will depend on our success in the struggle for its democratization — that is, our capacity to persuade some of the powerful to free themselves of their unbridled ambition for more and more power, at the expense of the majority.

We will continue to stress that the democratization which the United Nations so urgently needs will entail decentralizing the power accumulated in a small group of States, and in the Organization’s own bureaucracy, and transferring that power to the General Assembly, where it logically belongs. This is an urgent task; the world can not afford to wait another 15 years listening to speeches that lead nowhere. It is time to act.

It is all well and good to preach democracy, but it would be better still for us to put it into practice, right here, at the United Nations. It makes no sense to wage wars of aggression that kill hundreds of thousands of people with the purported aim of supporting democracy, while at the same time using every imaginable means and pretext to prevent a process to democratize the United Nations itself.

In addition, the General Assembly should become more proactive and its resolutions should be binding. The idea that the clear and unequivocal voice of “We the peoples” should be regarded as a mere recommendation with no binding power should be buried forever in our anti-democratic past.

The third and final session of the High-level Dialogue on the Democratization of the United Nations will be devoted to a frank discussion of the Security Council.

Many areas of the United Nations system are in urgent need of attention, but chief among them is the Security Council. It is a sad but undeniable fact that serious breaches of the peace and threats to international peace and security are being perpetrated by some members of the Security Council that seem unable to break what appears like an addiction to war.

In the case of some of those members, the veto privilege seems to have gone to their heads and has confused them to the point of making them think they are entitled to do as they please without consequence. The first principle of the United Nations, the one upon which our Organization is based, is “the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members”. The second principle is that ALL Members “shall fulfil in good faith the obligations assumed by them in accordance with the present

Charter". In other words, all attempts by Member States to put themselves above the Charter constitute a serious offence against the Membership and a threat to peace. Guaranteeing respect for these principles is something that can no longer be postponed.

As difficult as it is, solving the problem of the Security Council is a challenge we have to take up. I am well aware that by saying this I am stirring up a hornets' nest. But even hornets can be managed successfully if due precautions are taken. I propose that at this sixty-third session of the General Assembly we seriously consider what those precautions should be.

We hope that today, after all that has happened in the world since the United Nations was founded, our most powerful sister nations will be willing to give peace and democracy a chance. In any event, it should be borne in mind that privileges granted by law on the assumption that they are reasonable and for the common good remain valid only as long as that assumption holds true.

I think we all agree that merely increasing the number of members or the number of countries with the privileges of permanent membership or veto power in the Security Council would in no way address the core issue. Increasing the number of Security Council members, while necessary to ensure fairer and more geographically balanced representation, would do nothing to correct the anomalies that we should be trying to rectify.

In addition to the themes of Hunger, poverty and high oil and food prices and the High-level Dialogue on the Democratization of the United Nations (divided into three sessions), this sixty-third session of the General Assembly will devote special attention to the following major themes which, for the sake of brevity, in this oral presentation, I will now simply mention in passing. But I invite you all to review the full text of my presentation which is now available in all the working languages of our United Nations. Each of these themes is closely related to the lack of democracy at the United Nations and is considered of the utmost urgency.

Climate change. Today there is scientific consensus on the human origin of climate change, especially after the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued last year. The report concludes and asserts that global warming is "unequivocal" and that tangible solutions are needed to address it. The recent adoption of the Bali Plan of Action constitutes an important step in this direction.

In keeping with the progress already made, I want to remind all of us that this new Plan of Action does not negate the obligations defined by the Kyoto Protocol. The negotiation process on agreed long-term actions initiated in Bali must not and can not be used as a pretext by some, in order not to comply with their moral obligations to Humanity, and in particular, to execute the historical responsibility that they alone carry. All of us, collectively, have the moral duty, as well as the legal obligation, to define as soon as possible the new target goals for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions during the second, and subsequent periods of commitments under the Kyoto Protocol. The progressive development of human rights and international law compels us to move forward, not backwards.

These efforts, as well as the longer-term vision undertaken in Bali, must be guided by a single consideration: saving those small island States that today live in danger of disappearing entirely as nations. This is the real challenge of our day and this should be our immediate concern. In this manner, we can not accept, under any circumstance, proposals for mandatory emissions reduction targets that take for granted sacrificing the homelands of entire peoples.

In addition to concentrating on mitigation, we must mobilize with fervour to provide financing for the adaptation of the most vulnerable peoples on our Mother Earth. The resources needed are considerable but the most fundamental requirement is to gather genuine political will. If the political will exists, then we will be capable of the immense creativity that characterizes human beings and of finding new and efficient forms of financing so that no nation is left behind — denied the necessary technologies to face the phenomena of climate change. For this to occur, we will also have to search in a joint and brotherly manner for ways to make the needed transfer of technology a reality; a transfer that up until now has amounted to little more than mounds of paper. In this vein, we all must address, openly and without fear, the matter of intellectual property rights, in order to ensure genuine access by developing countries to those new technologies.

It is imperative for all countries to recognize the value of tropical forests as important carbon sinks and for the countries historically responsible for climate change to pay fair incentives to local communities for their conservation. We must not forget that deforestation, which causes 20 per cent of all greenhouse gas emissions, is largely a consequence of the extreme poverty of small farmers in developing countries.

Water. Water is not a commodity to be bought and sold on the open market. Guaranteeing access to drinking water constitutes a fundamental right of all peoples everywhere and is included among the goals of the United Nations Decade for Action, “Water for Life”.

The World Bank reports that by 2025, two thirds of the world’s population will not have enough clean water. This is essentially why it is said that water will be the “oil” of the twenty-first century, with all the consequences that that implies.

Those who seek to derive economic advantage, even from the worst of human tragedies, are pursuing the privatization of water, thereby denying peoples a human right as basic as the air we breathe.

We need to join forces and resources to take immediate steps to protect the sources of this precious resource, improve measures to prevent water pollution and alert peoples to the impending crisis, one which places at risk the lives and well-being of hundreds of millions, if not billions, of human beings.

This is what prompted the United Nations to proclaim the decade 2005-2015 the International Decade for Action, “Water for Life”. During this sixty-third session of the General Assembly we will make every effort to ensure that as much progress as possible is made towards the goals of the “Water for Life” Decade.

Terrorism and human rights. Any act of terrorism, whether or not it is committed by a Government, engenders more terrorism. Initiatives to stop this vicious cycle must begin at the level of State terrorism. Otherwise, the official struggle against terrorism perpetrated by individuals or organizations will lack moral authority and will never succeed in curbing what some see as nothing more than a defensive, albeit equally reprehensible, form of terrorism on the part of civil society. The question is how to overcome this vicious cycle of violence; towards that end, terrorism by powerful States against relatively weak States must stop.

No State should appropriate the right to decide on its own which States are terrorists, or sponsors of terrorism, and which are not. Less still should States that are guilty of wars of aggression, the worst form of terrorism imaginable, presume to arrogate that right unto themselves, and further, to unilaterally take action against those it has stigmatized.

For this reason, it is time for this General Assembly to embark, with all due seriousness, on a discussion of international terrorism, including its definition and the assignment of responsibilities for dealing with it. This is a task, my dear sisters and brothers, which can wait no longer.

Nuclear control and disarmament. General and complete disarmament is one of the ultimate objectives of the United Nations. Yet this urgent issue has been pushed into the background and has not received the kind of follow-up it deserves.

Next year marks the 50th anniversary of the adoption of General Assembly resolution 1378. That resolution was the first to identify “general and complete disarmament under effective international control” as a fundamental goal of the United Nations. All Member States co-sponsored that resolution. The conviction that “general and complete disarmament” constitutes one of the most important questions facing the world remains true in 2008. But fifty years later we have little progress to show the world.

Today there are an estimated 31,000 nuclear warheads deployed or in reserve in the stockpiles of eight countries. Of these, about 13,000 nuclear warheads are deployed and 4,600 are on high alert; that is, ready to be launched at a few minutes’ notice. The combined explosive yield of these weapons is approximately 5,000 megatons, roughly 200,000 times the explosive yield of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. This, brothers and sisters, is nothing less than suicidal madness.

I believe that the only way to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons is first to eliminate any threat of the use of these weapons in wartime and then to begin destroying them. Today many countries feel threatened by their nuclear-armed neighbours and thus seek nuclear balance within their region. The mere presence of 4,600 nuclear warheads on high alert poses intolerable risks to international security, since accidental launches can always occur.

The General Assembly has a clear mandate to consider principles regarding disarmament and the regulation of armaments, as well as to make recommendations. Each year this body adopts over 50 resolutions and decisions on these issues. Yet something is missing from our deliberations — namely, the effective implementation of our decisions by constructive action.

This presidency will call upon the Member States during this sixty-third session to adopt a results-based approach both to disarmament and to the regulation of armaments, an approach that measures progress by deeds — and not words or numbers of resolutions alone.

In the area of nuclear disarmament, all countries with nuclear weapons should immediately reduce their nuclear arsenals and suspend all programmes to develop and deploy new nuclear arms. Non-proliferation can not be used by those possessing nuclear arsenals as a ploy to divert attention from and to shrug off their obligation as a State to disarm. Taking steps in this direction would demonstrate to the rest of the world that they are genuine in their commitment to address what is still one of the gravest threats to Humanity's survival.

Human Trafficking, the situation of Palestine, Humanitarian Assistance and Gender Equality are other themes to which we will also give particular attention and priority. Human trafficking is one of the worst violations of human rights and now ranks as the world's third most profitable crime, together with drug trafficking and arms trafficking. All nations must work together in a coordinated manner to prevent this planetary plague, in order to eradicate it, to prosecute and punish the criminals involved and to protect and reintegrate its victims, the majority of whom are children and women.

The greatest case failure of the United Nations is the lack of a Palestinian State. Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations pledged as a “sacred trust” to establish a Palestine state on the Palestinian territory that was part of the Ottoman Empire. This same Assembly in 1947 approved resolution 181 that provided a detailed plan for partition of the territory within the Mandate of Palestine between an Arab State and a Jewish State. The same resolution goes on to state that the partition occur “not later than 1 October 1948”. Tragically, there was a partition of territory but not the establishment of a Palestinian State. On the question of Palestinian Statehood this body has failed completely. At this very moment people continue to die as a result of our incapacity to implement a resolution adopted more than 61 years ago. As a consequence, today the Palestinian situation is at the lowest, most critical point in its tragic history.

Humanitarian assistance, listed in the first Article of the Charter as one of the purposes of our Organization, constitutes an area of joint action for which all of us have reason to feel proud. Although an ample list of martyrs gives testimony to the nobility and generosity of many of our finest representatives in the field, measures must be taken to obviate this sacrifice of human lives.

As a result of the ever more frequent recurrence of natural phenomena linked to climate change and of human disasters of ever increasing magnitude, the United Nations finds itself under greater and greater pressure to bring assistance to hundreds of thousands of human beings in different areas around the world. It is true that United Nations staff members in areas of conflict, and humanitarian assistance personnel in particular, be they from intergovernmental or non-governmental organizations, have always served in high risk situations. But we should be concerned by the fact that the number of victims has more than doubled over the last five years. They are unjustly being blamed for the actions or decisions that the Security Council does or does not take.

Gender equality. If we are truly earnest in our quest to eradicate poverty and hunger, we must be vigilant in the inclusion of our sisters in the analysis and resolution of each of the above-mentioned problems, and make gender equality a key feature in the financing for development process. Women constitute the crucial indicator for bringing the poor out of poverty. Empirical studies consistently show that, in and across every society, improving the lives of poor women, improves lives across the board. And if only for this reason, the targeting of women and their empowerment is justified.

But there should also be a deeper moral force that compels us to action. Women and children bear the brunt of poverty. While it is true that poverty, climate change, the water crisis, war, violence, terrorism, and natural and human disasters affect us all, it is equally true that women are affected in hidden, often insidious, ways that men are not. Moreover, in the search for solutions to these problems, all too often, women are not included as principal stakeholders or protagonists in their own right. Guaranteeing gender equality, then, is not only compatible with, but is an essential feature of inclusion. This presidency will systematically include gender perspectives in our entire treatment of the priority issues.

Similarly, in examining the various themes discussed above, we should devote special attention to those most vulnerable, including most especially, the rights and needs of children in special situations of armed conflict and humanitarian disaster. Our efforts in this area must not be limited to the provision of shelter, clothing and food, but rather afford special attention to their right to education. Failure to address this most fundamental of rights would be to deny a generation of children that today live in adversity, the free exercise of their future rights, as adults, to full participation in our human community. This is an issue to which we will be giving priority attention in this sixty-third session of the General Assembly.

In conclusion, today more than ever before, candour is indispensable in international relations. I would like for this sixty-third session of the General Assembly to go down in history as the “Assembly of Frankness” for the sake of world peace and the eradication of poverty and hunger from the Earth. Considering the seriousness of the global crises, diffident and ambiguous language will get us nowhere. The United Nations cannot effectively tackle the deep-rooted and urgent problems of the day without being clear, firm and unequivocal. Sugar-coating, speaking euphemistically or engaging in petty semantics so as not to call things by their name, under an erroneous concept of diplomacy, has never worked and will never work. The world crisis is too serious to allow for euphemisms or half measures.

Change — real, credible change — is the watchword of the day. Even more than political will, we will need to summon great spiritual strength to carry out the changes needed to democratize the United Nations. This, in turn, will strengthen its capacity to contribute, with growing effectiveness, to the supreme cause of peace in our world. But knowing that we are in need of great spiritual strength must not discourage us — it is within our reach.

All persons and nations, without exception, possess enormous reserves of human nobility. It is time for us to tap into the reserves of moral strength within each of us as persons and of all of us as nations. If we do so, our hearts and our capacity to love and serve will grow and we will find ourselves better able to bring our great human family to new levels of solidarity that guarantee for all of us, and generations to come, a future of enduring peace.

Let us put to rest forever the unhealthy aspiration of dominance of one over the other. Let us free ourselves, as well, from addiction to war and violence in general. Such dreams and behaviour are incompatible with the principles, to which we have all committed ourselves, within the Charter and with the ideal of a world at peace and with international security. Let us work together now to make a truly “United Nations” — united, fraternal, joined in solidarity. Now is the time for all of us to begin the process of turning weapons into ploughshares to feed a hungry world.

Let Gandhi be for us not only someone to whom we render tribute in speeches and declarations but, more importantly, a paradigm that we try to emulate. Let us honour his global legacy by putting the greater good of our shared Humanity at the forefront of our collective endeavour to build a world community at peace with itself and in harmony with the Earth, our shared home.

Let us give genuine democracy and peace a chance. Let us conduct ourselves as the people we are: all sisters and brothers, reconciled with one another and committed to living in non-violence and SOLIDARITY. A democratized United Nations will be the indispensable tool for achieving these lofty goals.

Thank you.