

United Nations Nations Unies

THE PRESIDENT OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

LE PRESIDENT DE L'ASSEMBLEE GENERALE

13 February 2012

Statement of H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, President of the 66th Session of the General Assembly, at the New York University Event “The United Nations and the Business of Universality”

President John Sexton,
Professor Mustapha Tlili, Director of the NYU Center for Dialogues, and my friend and Special
Advisor,
Mr. James Hoge,
Distinguished colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to join you at this evening’s public event at New York University, to share with you a few thoughts on “The United Nations and the Business of Universality.”

This event is organized with the support of the New York University Centre for Dialogues and the NYU-SCPS Center for Global Affairs. I wish to thank both Centers for giving me this opportunity.

Thank you Professor Tlili for your kind words. The NYU Centre for Dialogues that you founded almost 10 years ago, and that you continue to lead today, is playing a significant role in building bridges between the Muslim world and the West, and promoting mutual respect and understanding. Your action deserves the support of us all.

This most impressive university, to which the NYU Centre for Dialogues belongs, would not be today what it is without your leadership, President Sexton - dear John, if I may. Let me then thank you for your kind invitation to address this remarkable audience.

Since first meeting you, John, I have been impressed by your creativity and your drive for innovation in higher education.

In addition to being one of the nation’s leading experts on the US Supreme Court’s jurisprudence concerning the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, you are a teacher. I deeply admire that you also conduct courses while maintaining your full responsibilities as President of NYU. This is evidence of your true dedication to education and knowledge.

You are also widely known in academia and beyond for having developed the groundbreaking “global university” concept, building NYU campuses worldwide. You have a vision for this world, and you are carrying it through with sincerity and great efficiency. NYU under your leadership is making its mark worldwide, fostering a new generation of men and women attuned to the global nature of today’s life, aware of its challenges, and keen to engage globally and achieve change locally.

International education is close to my heart. What can better prepare young people for life in the global village? I am sure, Ladies and Gentlemen, you will agree with me that the best answer is: exposure to different cultures and ways of thinking. Through dialogue and knowing each other.

This is one of the central tasks of the United Nations. To build peace through dialogue. To address the concerns of the people of the world – the concerns of us all.

The United Nations may, at times, appear to be considering issues that seem unrelated to our daily lives.

In fact, we are tackling those matters that define the lives of all of us. More often than not, the UN is at the forefront of developing a vision for the future.

Take terrorism— just one example. The General Assembly started addressing the issue of terrorism forty years ago. At a time when an attack on the World Trade Centre in New York was far from the public’s mind. Look where we are today!

Take another issue: the environment. Former UN Secretary-General U Thant famously gave a speech in 1970 at Harvard University – am I allowed to mention Harvard’s name here?! In any case, he spoke on the environment as a pressing issue, at a time when, frankly, no one cared much about it. Look where we are today!

This is the UN’s job: to bring nations to the table. To find common solutions to issues that might not be the topic du jour, but which we know will affect our lives in the years to come.

To understand how and why the UN and its General Assembly do business the way they do, we must start with the reasons for the UN’s founding.

In 1945, the leaders of the world came together in San Francisco and signed the United Nations Charter. They did so in the belief that every nation can advance its own interests by building common ground with the interests of others.

And that the whole of our power is greater than the sum of its parts.

The United Nations is an organization that illustrates that the yearning for peace is a universal search. And that universal peace requires universal solutions.

The desire of humankind for universal values can be traced back to the oldest times of humanity - whether through religions, classic philosophic debates or in the Age of Enlightenment. These values were set by Plato in the heavens of ideas: the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

Ever since, philosophers - including classic Muslim philosophers - Averroes, Avicenna, Ibn Khaldoun, to name a few – have considered these values as a basis for bridging our differences and bringing us together in one human community.

The most striking and brilliant expression of these ambitions may have found its achievement in Emmanuel Kant. It is said that when President Wilson was reflecting on the future of humanity after the disaster of World War One, one of his most relied upon readings was Kant's essay Perpetual Peace. These readings infused the spirit of the treaty that gave birth to the League of Nations.

The UN Charter, born after the tragedy of World War Two, took up this challenge again, striving to bring us ever closer to the desire for universal values. A hard road that we still pursue today, even after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Those who think of the United Nations as lacking in action should understand that the mission to bring together 193 nations is not an easy task.

Because universality is not a given. 193 countries implies 193 governments. 193 national economies. And how many cultures! And how many historical experiences! And how many national interests!

Yet, this is our business everyday.

I can tell you this from my perspective as President of the General Assembly.

Through trial and error, all 193 nations work together and consensus is built, slowly but surely.

I submit that consensus itself - agreement among all – is a democratic, modern path to reaching universality.

Much of the UN's work to build consensus takes place in the General Assembly. The UN Charter established the Assembly as the UN's chief deliberative and policy-making body.

Unlike any other international institution, the General Assembly is arguably the most universal, legitimate, representative body in the world. 193 Member States; one country, one vote.

Big and small countries, rich and poor - all count equally inside the General Assembly Hall. And their voice is the most legitimate voice of humanity. And with legitimacy comes moral weight and moral - if not political - obligations.

The Assembly is tasked to consider the full spectrum of international issues covered by the UN Charter - from international peace and security to human rights, to development. Decisions of the Assembly provide a global voice to major concerns of our time.

And the General Assembly provides a place – the place- for the world to connect.

Every September, as the citizens of New York are all too aware, 193 Heads of State and Government and other senior officials, as well as thousands of delegates, meet at UN Headquarters.

Despite appearances, the Assembly in this high-level week is much more than a talk shop. Global agendas are set. Paths forward are mapped. Commitments are made.

And it is quite thrilling, yet humbling, to be in the General Assembly Hall with hundreds of representatives from around the world. You hear it all - from English to Hiri Motu to Swahili. Such a gathering reminds you of just what the world has to offer. And what we have to offer the world.

But let me give you a couple of examples of what we can accomplish when the community of nations comes together.

This past September, for the first time ever, world leaders recognized that non-communicable diseases – heart disease, cancer, chronic lung diseases and diabetes - have reached epidemic proportions. We agreed to act. The international community committed itself to develop national capacities for addressing NCDs, and to strengthen national NCDs policies and plans.

There is power in these collective commitments. They offer support to governments in developing policies. They also create space for sharing ideas and best practices. Among these best practices is, for example, using low-cost, cost-effective interventions to build an effective national response to tobacco use.

Another example is showing why certain public awareness campaigns have led to more healthy activities than others.

By creating a global agenda, ideas grow and governments and communities are more empowered to follow a path that works.

Consider another critical issue- a political one this time: the responsibility to protect. “R2P” in UN speak.

R2P is a commitment made by world leaders at the UN World Summit in 2005. In essence, it is a commitment by States to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

It is a commitment by the international community as a whole to, through the UN, use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means, in accordance with Chapters Six and Eight of the UN Charter, to help protect populations from mass atrocities.

And it is a commitment by the international community to take collective action through the United Nations Security Council, in accordance with Chapter Seven of the Charter, on a case-by-case basis and in cooperation with relevant regional organizations as appropriate, should such peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations.

We have just seen in Libya the critical role of R2P. We have seen the Security Council's timely and resolute response in the face of an imminent threat of mass atrocities. And we have seen the UN's central role as a moral authority. A moral authority against the gross and systematic violation of human rights.

While some have raised questions about whether NATO overstepped its mandate in Libya, this does not change the normative reach of the R2P concept, nor our responsibility to act. It was – and it remains - clear to all that there could not be silence in the face of such brutality.

Why am I offering you these examples, you might ask? To illustrate what can be achieved when 193 nations agree to act. And to show that, despite their cultural, social, economic, historical and political particularities, some truths are self-evident and universal. They apply everywhere. They are universal values, as described in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am a diplomat who finds himself in NYU - this great temple of knowledge - and who thus could not resist the opportunity to engage in philosophical considerations about humankind's drive from the earliest times to achieve collective harmony through shared values.

The United Nations General Assembly is but the most recent expression of this long, demanding, yet exciting human journey to build a community of nations and to achieve Kant's dream of "perpetual peace."

Are we there yet? It would be both foolish and insincere for scholars and diplomats alike to ignore our collective failure.

Failure? Yes, today, in the Middle East, Africa, and other corners of our small world.

Yes, yesterday, in Rwanda and Bosnia.

It would be lacking in intellectual and moral honesty to pretend that the ideals of the UN Charter and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have been fully realised.

For I have seen first hand the legacy of brutality imposed by a dictator on his own people in Libya.

I have seen the devastating suffering of a whole nation in a Somalia, caught in the grinding of competing claims by political factions.

I am a witness to our world's continuous tragedies.

This is for me a daily lesson of humility and a lucid acknowledgment of the challenges on the road ahead.

But it is also a lesson of hope.

Why hope?

What the whole world for a year has been celebrating as "The Arab Spring" is one compelling answer. Before young Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself for freedom and dignity, who could have imagined such historic change? And that change occurred in the name of the universal values of Kant, in the name of the age of the Enlightenment, in the name of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It occurred in the name of freedom of expression, freedom of thought, gender equality, human dignity, the rule of law.

The Arab Spring is, in short, another step on the road to universality. No cultural relativism, no matter how cleverly argued, should obscure this truth.

Closer to home, on a more personal level, I have another reason to choose hope instead of despair in facing man's fate.

As a father of a five year old son, I have no other choice but to hope for a better world. Better for him and for all God's children. A world perhaps brought closer to achieving the shared values embodied in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

You, distinguished scholars of this great university, and we, diplomats at the United Nations, together, let us resolve to make it our daily business to work for the advent of that better world.

Let us commit ourselves to work together to achieve the universal good.

I thank you.