

8 July 2013

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić,  
President of the 67<sup>th</sup> Session of the General Assembly,  
at the Opening of the Thematic Debate on Inequality**

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon,  
Secretary General Insulza,  
Foreign Minister Rodrigues-Birkett,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me a great pleasure to welcome you to the General Assembly's thematic debate on Inequality.

I would like to acknowledge the great efforts that the Government of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana has made towards forging consensus on resolution 67/230, which has mandated this event.

Entitled "The Role of the United Nations in Promoting a New Global Human Order," I believe it can serve as an important reference point for today's discussions, together with the Secretary-General's September 2012 report on the same topic. I thank him on behalf of the General Assembly for his engagement and dedication to this issue.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the Organization of American States for their significant assistance in organizing this thematic debate. Allow me also to emphasize my profound gratitude to its Secretary General, my good friend H.E. José Miguel Insulza. I am personally indebted to him for the invaluable contributions he has made to my High-level Advisory Panel, which is helping me reflect on the future of multilateralism in our increasingly globalized and interdependent world.

Excellencies,

The strive for social justice, together with the aspiration to mitigate inequality, has been a universal quest for millennia, inscribed in the holy books of humanity's great faiths.

In the Bible, it is written that "I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened," for "God shows no partiality." A basic teaching of Islam describes all people to be equal as the teeth of a comb. And in the Buddhist Lotus Sutra, we are told that all men and women, without discrimination, have in them the same potential to achieve full awakening.

Establishing a level playing field, upon which everyone's merits are given an even chance to thrive, is also deeply ingrained in our diverse ethical and philosophic traditions.

One of history's wisest sages, Confucius, based his thinking on the principle of 'Ren,' describing it as a sincere consideration for fellow human beings—a sense of respect and compassion based on the equal dignity of each.

Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke and Montesquieu argued that the equal rights of individuals are premised on a common sharing of the faculty of reason, which no institution of man has the right to disregard.

Manifestly, the struggle against inequality has been present throughout centuries; but I believe it has become the great imperative of our age.

It has an increasing influence on how domestic reforms are conceived, and international covenants drafted.

It is also inherent to the framework of the post-2015 agenda, agreed by the world's leaders last June in Rio de Janeiro.

They outlined a holistic vision, premised on a symbiotic relationship between the three dimensions of sustainable development—economic, social, and environmental.

They conferred new mandates upon the General Assembly, assigning to us the responsibility to convert into practical actions the global aspirations they proclaimed, at the heart of which was a solemn pledge to “strive for inclusive, equitable development approaches to overcome poverty and inequality.”

Excellencies,

I convened this thematic debate because I believe that the achievement of the universal transition to sustainability requires a greater commitment to bridge the divide between the have-s and have not-s.

This has become one of the defining challenges of our time.

Unless we find ways to decisively address it, we may soon be entering an era of global discontent unlike any in history—with profound and unprecedented consequences for the entire world.

Consider that over the past three decades, inequality within most developed and developing countries has increased. With few exceptions, marginalized groups—such as women, ethnic minorities, indigenous populations, and people who live in rural areas—have failed to significantly improve their standing in their respective environments.

In addition, disparities between high- and low-income states have nearly doubled in less than 20 years. Differences in individual wealth are even larger, with the top ten percent of the population now owning over seventy percent of it—and the top one percent possessing a staggering 32 percent of the world's assets.

In my view, the perpetuation of such trends does not serve the strategic interest of any nation.

Academic research unambiguously indicates that highly unequal societies have shorter and less robust periods of growth. Moreover, they tend to be more susceptible to financial crises, and less able to leverage the impact of economic expansion on reducing poverty. The inequality of conditions exacerbates crime rates, the spread of communicable diseases, and the tempo of climate change, whilst also lowering social cohesion and mobility.

What is perhaps most alarming is that it leads to greater instability and unrest—a result of the breakdown in confidence towards those at the top to genuinely look after the interests of everyone else.

Excellencies,

Across the globe, mass protests and popular revolts are becoming commonplace.

Those scenes of discontent are now the iconic images of the past few years.

Whatever the specifics of their circumstances and grievances, disgruntled populations the world-over are having their patience come to an end.

Think of all the individuals with mobile phones—men and women dissatisfied with the lack of a fair chance to secure gainful employment, or plausible access to education and healthcare—standing side by side with millions of others just like themselves. Armed for the most part only with the knowledge they have gained of how others live better than they do—whether they are found around the block or across the globe—they demand immediate redress.

A well-known essayist has described our present condition succinctly: “We have all the information in the universe at our fingertips,” he wrote, “while our most basic problems go unsolved year after year: climate change, income inequality, wage stagnation, national debt, [...] deteriorating infrastructure, declining news standards. All around,” he concluded, “we see dazzling technological change, but no progress.”

Excellencies,

To achieve the promise of sustainable development, I believe we need to meet the challenge posed by the escalating concentration of affluence in a diminishing proportion of the world’s population.

The next nine hundred days will be critical. That is how long we have to fully incorporate the fight against inequality into the SDGs that we have been tasked to conceive and adopt.

We will need to learn from our past mistakes and failures, ascertaining which of the current policies have produced the desired effects, and which have not.

This amounts to a call for global self-assessment—an essential first step towards delivering social justice and creating the sorts of economies that invest enough in the future of all people.

Otherwise, we run the great risk of being relegated to the sidelines to watch events unfold with growing helplessness, as the gap between our duties and capabilities continues to widen.

Have no doubt that inadequate action today will lead to exceptionally harsh judgments and bitter recriminations tomorrow.

Excellencies,

Just as the effects of climate change can only be confronted by the international community acting in concert, so the myriad challenges posed by inequality can only be met by nations coming together to address them with the sense of urgency they deserve.

We must make a strategic commitment to repair the many broken bonds of our societies, ceasing to turn a blind eye to the democratic aspirations of peoples around the world who seek greater empowerment.

We must remake the global compact, shaping our laws, customs and mores to accord more fully with the principle of equality of opportunity—a standard of justice conferred upon us by the divine prescriptions found in the holy books of our diverse faiths, and reaffirmed time and again by the writings of our most thoughtful philosophers.

Plutarch, one of the greatest Roman thinkers, wrote close to two millennia ago that “an imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment for all nations.”

To redress this disparity has been the ambition of successive generations. I believe ours, however, has an unprecedented opportunity in this respect.

That is the hope of the post-2015 agenda, one of the most important promises that sustainable development holds out to the world: to provide relief from the growing inequality.

If ever an extraordinary response by the international community has been needed, it is now. We must come together in common cause and unity of purpose: to serve the interests of all, by tending to the needs of the increasing many that have been left behind.

Thank you for your attention.