

SECRETARY-GENERAL'S STATEMENT AT THE COMMEMORATIVE SESSION
OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

24 October 1985

Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates,

This is a solemn moment. Leaders of nations are assembled here and behind them all is the single, collective constituency of the human race. Every such gathering at a historic point involves a report to that constituency -- to its vast, silent majority which wants peace with justice and dignity, with freedom from fear and the hope of a better tomorrow.

The observance of this anniversary has meaning not so much as a symbol but as an opportunity. In its own way, the occasion has set the stage to make a fresh beginning and try and overcome current stalemates on major issues. The commemoration assumed the importance that it did because international relations had reached a critical stage. The time had come to reflect on where a retreat from multilateralism would lead the world.

The Assembly has had a comprehensive and well-focussed general debate. Delegations from all regions have made balanced assessments of both the achievements and the failures of the United Nations. The practical and pressing question of how to make the United Nations more effective has been the running theme of the debate. Answers may differ but there is a common recognition of the value of the United Nations as the most authentic expression of the international community in all its diversity. No single national viewpoint can dominate or exclude others in this forum. The challenge is to hammer out agreements from the differences and to harmonize the actions of nations in the attainment of their common ends.

The forty years of its working have made the United Nations a unique instrument in the hands of governments for answering this challenge. With the admission of one hundred and eight states in addition to the fifty one original signatories, the Organization has vastly greater legitimacy and is far more representative today than it was when its Charter came into force. At the same time, it has kept pace with the phenomenal growth of human concerns brought about by progress in science and technology, communications and social awareness. Its agenda now embraces all subjects which affect international peace and human advancement.

It is paradoxical, therefore, that with greater legitimacy, there should be less power and cohesion. The paradox is ironic but it is not inherent. If the sense of solidarity among the membership is strong enough, the instrument can be used with the effectiveness that its nature demands. The world's statesmanship is on test.

It seems that greater coherence could be achieved and the sense of solidarity strengthened if there were less confrontational postures and also if Member States, faced with an issue, paid regard both to the principles and the practical considerations involved. Multilateralism as embodied in the United Nations is sustained by an attachment to common ends and this attachment is born of adherence to principles. It would be a self-stultifying course for the United Nations to sanction any transaction or undertaking which ignores or bypasses the principles of the Charter. But devotion to principles needs to express itself in concrete, workable proposals and not in rhetoric only. If the note of authority in the pronouncements of the United Nations is weakened, if either principles or pragmatic considerations are disregarded, there is a price to pay in terms of mobilizing the support of governments and the enthusiasm of peoples throughout the globe.

Humanity cannot afford to pay that price. We are living in a world seething with tensions and racked by violence. Unresolved disputes continue to fester. The scourge of terrorism is yet unchecked. Drug abuse has spread like the plague. Crime has been internationalized. Sophisticated arms are within easy access. The only rational response to such a situation is for governments to co-operate in enforcing a code of behaviour which will restore civility to international life.

As we are gathered here at this commemorative session, there are popular expectations of a relaxation of tensions, global or regional. International opinion is not as cynical as we sometimes presume but it is harshly intolerant of professions not followed by practice and of hopes that are belied. The affirmations of commitment to the Charter made during this session -- and in the designation of 1986 as the Year of Peace -- need to be backed up by responsible negotiations towards resolving major disputes and in the key areas of arresting the arms race, overcoming the crisis in development and promoting human rights. If they are not, public opinion will regard the pronouncements made here as mere posturing, an exercise in hypocrisy. Acting together, governments can avert that kind of disillusionment.

At this critical moment in history, it is important to recall that the very first resolution adopted by the United Nations dealt with the elimination of atomic weapons and the use of atomic power for peaceful purposes. Today, forty years later, this goal seems remote; the terminal danger posed by the nuclear arms race has grown rather than abated. Meanwhile, the conventional arms race has proceeded apace and exacted a toll in scores of wars and a vast number dead.

A world which spends nearly one trillion dollars a year for military purposes, and cannot spare a fraction of that for the elimination of poverty, is a world with a grossly distorted sense of

priorities. It is also an insecure world, with its insecurity aggravated and made chronic by the accumulation of weapons, nuclear or conventional. Given a consciousness of this fact, there is no reason to regard the arms race as irreversible. The conclusion of some specific agreements on arms limitation over the years shows that compromises are possible and a sense of common interest can prevail over the illusion of unilateral advantages.

It is this sense of common interest that, I am sure, will inspire bilateral negotiations between the two most powerful states. I welcome the forthcoming meeting between the leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States. They bear a responsibility not only to their own peoples but also to all humanity and to future generations. There is hope all over the world that their meeting will lead to substantive progress in relieving the dread of nuclear catastrophe. This could turn the tide of history.

The crisis in development, especially as reflected in the external debt situation of developing countries, is an alarming symptom of the disequilibrium in the global economy. It calls for imaginative solutions. The quest for these needs to be imbued with a greater sense of partnership between developed and developing countries. The issues involved, centring on trade and finance, have such profound political and social implications that they need to be dealt with effectively as part of a wider political process. Failure to initiate it can lead to widespread economic decline and social chaos. The industrial countries will not remain untouched as the global economy can now hardly be said to operate in a manner conducive to their own growth and prosperity.

These problems are not new. Much debate and analysis has already taken place. The next step would be for the political leadership of Member States to provide a vital impulse to working out their solutions. The effort would need to be appropriately carried forward, using to the fullest the mechanisms of this Organization.

One of the distinctive features of the ethos created by the United Nations is the international concern with the promotion of human rights. While there is need to end violations in a number of societies, there is the unique and universally condemned situation of apartheid where racial discrimination is organized by the state. The situation clearly shows that when human rights are suppressed, resistance erupts and when resistance is met by violence, the political and economic cost can become unbearable. I believe that pressure exerted by the world community can help resolve this situation. This would set a persuasive example of how seriously we take one of the purposes of the United Nations stated in the very first article of the Charter.

Mr. President: This is not the moment for me to refer to the various focal points of tension in the world. The political climate today may be bleak but it is capable of being transformed. One act of joint statesmanship, especially by the major powers, one example of the prevailing of the sense of common interest, whether in a strategic region or on the global level, can have that transforming effect.

Finally, I would submit that the Charter of the United Nations whose coming into force we are commemorating today is a treaty unlike any other. It embodies a pledge given by one hundred fifty-nine states not only to one another but to all the peoples of the world. The terms of the pledge were not suggested merely by idealism. Chastened by a most destructive war, the framers of the Charter had a concentrated understanding of the roots of conflict and the necessities of peace. I believe that if the primary principles of the Charter retain their relevance, as they do, it is because they are not incompatible with hard-headed but far-sighted realism. If we recapture the insights which permeate the Charter, the capacity of the United Nations will be enhanced and its authority renewed.

The fear of nuclear disaster, the agonies of the victims of conflict, the despair of the poor, the suffering of the persecuted and the uprooted, the rampancy of violence, the derangements which imperil order and the juxtapositions of peril and promise throughout the human situation -- none of these can be removed or overcome by the efforts of any one government alone. All underline the need to strengthen that structure of international co-operation which is the United Nations.
