

SECRETARY-GENERAL PRESENTS HIS ANNUAL REPORT TO GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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Following is the text as delivered of Secretary-General Kofi Annan's address today, presenting his annual report to the opening meeting of the United Nations General Assembly:

I am deeply honoured to address this last General Assembly of the twentieth century, and to present to you my annual report on the work of the Organization. The text of the report is before you.

On this occasion, I shall like to address the prospects for human security and intervention in the next century. In light of the dramatic events of the past year, I trust that you will understand this decision.

As Secretary-General, I have made it my highest duty to restore the United Nations to its rightful role in the pursuit of peace and security, and to bring it closer to the peoples it serves. As we stand at the brink of a new century, this mission continues.

But it continues in a world transformed by geo-political, economic, technological and environmental changes whose lasting significance still eludes us. As we seek new ways to combat the ancient enemies of war and poverty, we will succeed only if we all adapt our Organization to a world with new actors, new responsibilities, and new possibilities for peace and progress.

State sovereignty, in its most basic sense, is being redefined by the forces of globalization and international cooperation.

The State is now widely understood to be the servant of its people, and not vice versa. At the same time, individual sovereignty -- and by this I mean the human rights and fundamental freedoms of each and every individual as enshrined in our Charter -- has been enhanced by a renewed consciousness of the right of every individual to control his or her own destiny.

These parallel developments -- remarkable and, in many ways, welcome -- do not lend themselves to easy interpretations or simple conclusions.

They do, however, demand of us a willingness to think anew -- about how the United Nations responds to the political, human rights and humanitarian crises affecting so much of the world; about the means employed by the international community in situations of need; and about our willingness to act in some areas of conflict, while limiting ourselves to humanitarian palliatives in many other crises whose daily toll of death and suffering ought to shame us into action.

Our reflections on these critical questions derive not only from the events of last year, but from a variety of challenges that confront us today, most urgently in East Timor.

From Sierra Leone to the Sudan to Angola to the Balkans to Cambodia and to Afghanistan, there are a great number of peoples who need more than just words of sympathy from the international community. They need a real and sustained commitment to help end their cycles of violence, and launch them on a safe passage to prosperity.

While the genocide in Rwanda will define for our generation the consequences of inaction in the face of mass murder, the more recent conflict in Kosovo has prompted important questions about the consequences of action in the absence of complete unity on the part of the international community.

It has cast in stark relief the dilemma of what has been called humanitarian intervention: on one side, the question of the legitimacy of an action taken by a regional organization without a United Nations mandate; on the other, the universally recognized imperative of effectively halting gross and systematic violations of human rights with grave humanitarian consequences.

The inability of the international community in the case of Kosovo to reconcile these two equally compelling interests -- universal legitimacy and effectiveness in defence of human rights -- can only be viewed as a tragedy.

It has revealed the core challenge to the Security Council and to the United Nations as a whole in the next century: to forge unity behind the principle that massive and systematic violations of human rights -- wherever they may take place -- should not be allowed to stand.

The Kosovo conflict and its outcome have prompted a wide debate of profound importance to the resolution of conflicts from the Balkans to Central Africa to East Asia. And to each side in this critical debate, difficult questions can be posed.

To those for whom the greatest threat to the future of international order is the use of force in the absence of a Security Council mandate, one might ask -- not in the context of Kosovo -- but in the context of Rwanda: If, in those dark days and hours leading up to the genocide, a coalition of States had been prepared to act in defence of the Tutsi population, but did not receive prompt Council authorization, should such a coalition have stood aside and allowed the horror to unfold?

To those for whom the Kosovo action heralded a new era when States and groups of States can take military action outside the established mechanisms for enforcing international law, one might ask: Is there not a danger of such interventions undermining the imperfect, yet resilient, security system created after the Second World War, and of setting dangerous precedents for future interventions without a clear criterion to decide who might invoke these precedents, and in what circumstances?

Mr. President,

In response to this turbulent era of crises and interventions, there are those who have suggested that the Charter itself -- with its roots in the aftermath of global inter-State war -- is ill-suited to guide us in a world of ethnic wars and intra-State violence. I believe they are wrong.

The Charter is a living document, whose high principles still define the aspirations of peoples everywhere for lives of peace, dignity and development. Nothing in the Charter precludes a recognition that there are rights beyond borders.

Indeed, its very letter and spirit are the affirmation of those fundamental human rights. In short, it is not the deficiencies of the Charter which have brought us to this juncture, but our difficulties in applying its principles to a new era; an era when strictly traditional notions of sovereignty can no longer do justice to the aspirations of peoples everywhere to attain their fundamental freedoms.

The sovereign States who drafted the Charter over half a century ago were dedicated to peace, but experienced in war.

They knew the terror of conflict, but knew equally that there are times when the use of force may be legitimate in the pursuit of peace. That is why the Charter's own words declare that "armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest". But what is that common interest? Who shall define it? Who will defend it? Under whose authority? And with what means of intervention? These are the monumental questions facing us as we enter the new century. While I will not propose specific answers or criteria, I shall identify four aspects of intervention which I believe hold important lessons for resolving future conflicts.

First, it is important to define intervention as broadly as possible, to include actions along a wide continuum from the most pacific to the most coercive. A tragic irony of many of the crises that continue to go unnoticed and unchallenged today is that they could be dealt with by far less perilous acts of intervention than the one we witnessed recently in Yugoslavia. And yet, the commitment of the international community to peacekeeping, to humanitarian assistance, to rehabilitation and reconstruction varies greatly from region to region, and crisis to crisis.

If the new commitment to intervention in the face of extreme suffering is to retain the support of the world's peoples, it must be -- and must be seen to be -- fairly and consistently applied, irrespective of region or nation. Humanity, after all, is indivisible.

It is also necessary to recognize that any armed intervention is itself a result of the failure of prevention. As we consider the future of intervention, we must redouble our efforts to enhance our preventive capabilities -- including early warning, preventive diplomacy, preventive deployment and preventive disarmament.

A recent powerful tool of deterrence has been the actions of the Tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. In their battle against impunity lies a key to deterring crimes against humanity. With these concerns in mind, I have dedicated the introductory essay of my annual report to exploring ways of moving from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention. Even the costliest policy of prevention is far cheaper, in lives and in resources, than the least expensive use of armed force.

Second, it is clear that sovereignty alone is not the only obstacle to effective action in human rights or humanitarian crises. No less significant are the ways in which the Member States of the United Nations define their national interest in any given crisis.

Of course, the traditional pursuit of national interest is a permanent feature of international relations and of the life and work of the Security Council. But as the world has changed in profound ways since the end of the cold war, I believe our conceptions of national interest have failed to follow suit.

A new, more broadly defined, more widely conceived definition of national interest in the new century would, I am convinced, induce States to find far greater unity in the pursuit of such basic Charter values as democracy, pluralism, human rights, and the rule of law.

A global era requires global engagement. Indeed, in a growing number of challenges facing humanity, the collective interest is the national interest. Third, in the event that forceful intervention becomes necessary, we must ensure that the Security Council, the body charged with authorizing force under international law -- is able to rise to the challenge.

The choice, as I said during the Kosovo conflict, must not be between Council unity and inaction in the face of genocide -- as in the case of Rwanda, on the one hand; and Council division, and regional action, as in the case of Kosovo, on the other.

In both cases, the Member States of the United Nations should have been able to find common ground in upholding the principles of the Charter, and acting in defence of our common humanity.

As important as the Council's enforcement power is its deterrent power. Unless it is able to assert itself collectively where the cause is just and where the means are available, its credibility in the eyes of the world may well suffer.

If States bent on criminal behaviour know that frontiers are not the absolute defence; if they know that the Security Council will take action to halt crimes against humanity, then they will not embark on such a course of action in expectation of sovereign impunity.

The Charter requires the Council to be the defender of the common interest, and unless it is seen to be so -- in an era of human rights, interdependence, and globalization -- there is a danger that others could seek to take its place.

Let me say that the Council's prompt and effective action in authorizing a multinational force for East Timor reflects precisely the unity of purpose that I have called for today. Already, however, far too many lives have been lost and far too much destruction has taken place for us to rest on our laurels. The hard work of bringing peace and stability to East Timor still awaits us.

Finally, after the conflict is over, in East Timor as everywhere, it is vitally important that the commitment to peace be as strong as the commitment to war.

In this situation, too, consistency is essential. Just as our commitment to humanitarian action must be universal if it is to be legitimate, so our commitment to peace cannot end with the cessation of hostilities. The aftermath of war requires no less skill, no less sacrifice, no fewer resources in order to forge a lasting peace and avoid a return to violence.

Kosovo -- and other United Nations missions currently deployed or looming over the horizon -- presents us with just such a challenge. Unless the United Nations is given the means and support to succeed, not only the peace, but the war, too, will be lost. From civil administration to policing to the creation of a civil society capable of sustaining a tolerant, pluralist, prosperous society, the challenges facing our peacekeeping, peacemaking and peace-building missions are immense.

But if we are given the means -- in Kosovo and in Sierra Leone, in East Timor -- we have a real opportunity to break the cycles of violence, once and for all.

Mr. President,

We leave a century of unparalleled suffering and violence. Our greatest, most enduring test remains our ability to gain the respect and support of the world's peoples.

If the collective conscience of humanity -- a conscience which abhors cruelty, renounces injustice and seeks peace for all peoples -- cannot find in the United Nations its greatest tribune, there is a grave danger that it will look elsewhere for peace and for justice.

If it does not hear in our voices, and see in our actions, reflections of its own aspirations, its needs, and its fears, it may soon lose faith in our ability to make a difference.

Just as we have learned that the world cannot stand aside when gross and systematic violations of human rights are taking place, so we have also learned that intervention must be based on legitimate and universal principles if it is to enjoy the sustained support of the world's peoples.

This developing international norm in favour of intervention to protect civilians from wholesale slaughter will no doubt continue to pose profound challenges to the international community.

Any such evolution in our understanding of State sovereignty and individual sovereignty will, in some quarters, be met with distrust, scepticism, even hostility. But it is an evolution that we should welcome.

Why? Because, despite its limitations and imperfections, it is testimony to a humanity that cares more, not less, for the suffering in its midst, and a humanity that will do more, and not less, to end it.

It is a hopeful sign at the end of the twentieth century.

Thank you.