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**HEADLINE:** THE WORLD COMMUNITY OFTEN FAILS TO ACT TOGETHER, BUT IT CAN AND IT SHOULD;  
'OF COURSE INTERESTS AND IDEAS WILL ALWAYS CLASH, BUT WE CAN IMPROVE ON THIS CENTURY'S DISMAL RECORD'

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**BODY:**

OURS IS a world in which no individual, and no country, exists in isolation. All of us live simultaneously in our own communities and in the world at large. Peoples and cultures are increasingly hybrid. The same icons, whether on a movie screen or a computer screen, are recognisable from Berlin to Bangalore. We are all consumers in the same global economy. We are all influenced by the same tides of political, social and technological change. Pollution, organised crime and the proliferation of deadly weapons likewise show little regard for the niceties of borders; they are "problems without passports", and as such our common enemy. We are connected, wired, interdependent.

Much of this is nothing new; human beings have interacted across the planet for centuries. But today's "globalisation" is different. It is happening more rapidly. It is driven by new engines, such as the Internet. And it is governed by different rules, or, in many cases, by no rules at all. Globalisation is bringing us more choices and new opportunities for prosperity. It is making us more familiar with global diversity. However, millions of people worldwide experience globalisation not as an agent of progress, but as a disruptive force, almost hurricane-like in its ability to destroy lives, jobs and traditions. For many there is an urge to resist the process and take refuge in the illusory comforts of nationalism, fundamentalism or other "isms".

Faced with the potential good of globalisation as well as its risks; faced with the persistence of deadly conflicts in which civilians are the primary targets; faced with the pervasiveness of poverty and injustice; we must be able to identify the areas where collective action is needed to safeguard global interests. Local communities have their fire departments, municipal services and town councils. Nations have their legislatures and judicial bodies. But in today's globalised world, the institutions and mechanisms available for global action, not to mention our general sense of a shared global fate, are hardly more than embryonic. It is high time we gave more concrete meaning to the idea of the "international community".

What makes a community? What binds it together? For some it is faith. For others it is the defence of an idea, such as democracy. Some communities are homogeneous, others multicultural. Some are as small as schools and villages; others as large as continents. Today, of course, more and more communities are "virtual", discovering and promoting their shared values through the latest communications and information technologies.

What binds us into an international community? In the broadest sense there is a shared vision of a better world for all people, as set out, for example, in the founding Charter of the United Nations. There is our sense of common vulnerability in the face of global warming and the threat posed by the spread of weapons of mass destruction. There is the framework of international law, treaties and human rights conventions. There is equally our sense of shared opportunity, which is why we build common markets and joint institutions such as the United Nations. Together, we are stronger.

Some people say the international community is only a fiction. Others say it is too elastic a

concept to have any real meaning. Still others say it is a mere vehicle of convenience, to be trotted out only in emergencies or when a scapegoat for inaction is needed. Some say there are no internationally recognised norms, goals or fears on which to base such a community. Opened pages refer routinely to the "so-called" international community. And news reports often put the term in quotation marks, as if it does not yet have the solidity of actual fact. I believe these sceptics are wrong. The international community does exist. It has an address. It has achievements to its credit.

When governments, urged along by civil society, come together to adopt a statute for the creation of an International Criminal Court, that is the international community at work for the rule of law. When we see an outpouring of international aid to the victims of earthquakes in Turkey and Greece - a great deal of it from those having no apparent link with Turkey and Greece except for a sense of common humanity - that is the international community following its humanitarian impulse. When people come together to press governments to relieve the world's poorest countries from crushing debt burdens, that is the international community throwing its weight behind the cause of development. When the popular conscience, outraged at the carnage caused by land-mines, obliges governments to adopt a convention banning these deadly weapons, that is the international community at work for collective security.

There are many more examples of the international community at work, from East Timor to Kosovo. At the same time, there are important caveats. Too often the international community fails to do what is needed. It failed to prevent the genocide in Rwanda. For too long it reacted with weakness and hesitation to the horror of "ethnic cleansing" in the former Yugoslavia. In East Timor, it acted too late to save many hundreds of lives and thousands of homes from wanton destruction. The international community has not done enough to help Africa at a time when Africa needs it most and most stands to benefit. And it allows nearly three billion people - almost half of all humanity - to subsist on \$ 2 or less a day in a world of unprecedented wealth. The international community does not always get together effectively to fulfil a common objective. But it can, and it should.

The international system for much of our century has been based on division and hard calculations of realpolitik. In the new century, we can and must do better. I do not mean to suggest that an era of complete harmony is within our reach. Of course, interests and ideas will always clash. But we can improve on this century's dismal record. The international community is a "work in progress". Many strands of co-operation have asserted themselves over the years. We must now stitch them into a strong fabric of community - of international community for an international era.

**GRAPHIC:** A UN soldier guides a convoy over a makeshift bridge in Bosnia Oleg; Popov/Reuters

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