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A working summit, not a celebration

By Kofi A. Annan

This week's summit at the United Nations is the largest gathering of national leaders the world has ever seen. And its agenda - to chart a course for humanity at the start of a new millennium - is nothing if not ambitious.

I suggested this meeting back in 1997, when I became Secretary-General of the United Nations and laid out my plans for reform. I felt that the millennium year, with its potent symbolism, would be the right moment for world leaders to come together and take stock.

Much that has happened in the last three years confirms my view that more than the calendar is changing.

The Asian financial crisis showed that the effects of economic change anywhere in the world are now felt everywhere, but not in an even or equitable way.

The protests at the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle last November showed that many people are unhappy about globalisation, or at least about the way it is being handled. They feel too much attention is paid to commercial interests, not enough to social, cultural or environmental ones.

And several developments - including the events in Kosovo and the arrest of General Pinochet - have shown that the way a state treats its own people is no longer considered a purely internal affair.

All this convinces me that we are indeed living in a new era. Globalisation is real. It is highly beneficial to some. It is potentially beneficial to all - but only if states work together to put its benefits within reach of all their people.

Without that common effort, billions will be left in poverty and squalor, and even those who have begun to better themselves will be at the mercy of sudden economic change.

We face global challenges which oblige us to work together. If that is true in the economic and social sphere, it applies even more to the challenge of massacre and war. The instinct of human solidarity - which impels some states to come to the aid of each other's citizens, or to indict each other's former dictators - is laudable. But when such actions are taken by one or a few states on their own authority, they bring with them a danger of world anarchy.

The world will be safer as well as more just when there is an International Criminal Court to judge mass murderers whom their own national courts are unable or unwilling to try; and when people everywhere feel confident that, if they are threatened with mass destruction, the United Nations will take action. (Not always military action - that should be a last resort, for extreme cases - but effective preventive action, with diplomacy, good advice and, where appropriate, economic assistance or pressure.)

Even more obviously, we need to work together to preserve the natural resources on which the whole earth's population depends. We shall look culpably irresponsible, in our grandchildren's eyes, if we leave them a planet that is largely uninhabitable, or unable to sustain human life.

Am I suggesting that all these problems can be solved in three days, by 150 presidents and prime ministers making speeches at each other? Of course not. In fact, none of them can be solved by governments alone. States will need the help of other "actors", such as private corporations and citizens' groups, whose role in the international system is growing.

But a start on global action has to be made somewhere, and if not at the United Nations, where?

Already we are forging new partnerships with business, with philanthropic foundations and with non-profit groups on a wide range of projects - bringing medical information to developing countries via the Internet; providing communications equipment and expertise for use in emergencies; increasing vaccine coverage among the world's children; and more.

And in the last ten days, to prepare for the summit, we have brought a remarkable variety of groups to UN headquarters: civil society organisations, presiding officers of the world's parliaments, and for the first time, religious and spiritual leaders.

The UN is the universal forum, where all the world's peoples are represented. The very fact that so many national leaders are in New York this week to consider "the role of the United Nations in the 21st century", shows that they still regard it, potentially at least, as the indispensable instrument for tackling our shared problems. But they need to adapt it to the tasks in hand. This is a working summit, not a celebration.

The leaders will adopt a declaration reaffirming our shared values and setting goals for the next 15 or 20 years.

A declaration by itself is of little value, I know. But a declaration containing firm pledges and precise targets, solemnly accepted by the leaders of all nations, can be of great value to the world's peoples, as a yardstick by which to judge their rulers' performance.

I hope it will be seen not as a mere statement of principles, but as a plan of action. And I hope the whole world will be watching to see how it is carried out.

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