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Press Release SG/SM/7544

AS GENERAL DEBATE BEGINS, SECRETARY-GENERAL TELLS MEMBER STATES: "KEY DECISIONS LIE IN YOUR HANDS"

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Following is the text of the statement by Secretary-General Kofi Annan, delivered today at the opening of the general debate of the fifty-fifth session of the General Assembly:

"The tumult and the shouting dies down -- "The captains and the kings depart --"

In other years this day, when you begin your General Debate, marks the climax of the United Nations calendar. This year, coming the week after our historic Millennium Summit, it may seem something of an anticlimax.

But I prefer to see it as the moment when we roll up our sleeves and start putting action to the bold pledges that our Heads of State and Government have made. And it is in that spirit that I have the honour to present to you my Annual Report on the Work of the Organization.

This year I have not tried to give my annual report any grand, overarching theme. I felt that you would neither need nor want that, since I had already set out, in my Millennium Report, what I see as the major challenges for humanity, and for this Organization, at the start of the new century.

Needless to say, I am delighted that many of the commitments and targets I suggested in that Report have now been solemnly adopted by the Heads of State and Government, in their Declaration last Friday.

Clearly, there is broad consensus on what needs to be done -- broader than many people would have expected in so large and diverse an Organization. What is vital now, however, is that we also agree on the means of doing it, and that we equip ourselves with the right tools.

In particular, it is vital that this Organization, the United Nations itself, should be capable of playing the role that the world's peoples expect of it. It must be, as your Heads of State and Government declared, a more effective instrument for pursuing the priorities they have outlined:

-- the fight for development -- which is also the fight against poverty, ignorance and disease, including the world-wide scourge of HIV-AIDS;

-- the fight against injustice in all its forms, from gross inequalities of power and wealth, through corruption, discrimination and oppression to the extremes of mass destruction or genocide;

- 2 - Press Release SG/SM/7544 12 September 2000

-- the fight against violence, terror and crime, which take on new forms as we develop new technology, and which regrettably march in step with the development of a global economy;

-- and the fight against the degradation and destruction of our common home, the earth -- a fight that still does not receive the priority attention that it merits, despite the constant accumulation of evidence that our present patterns of production and consumption are ecologically unsustainable.

I do not mean, of course, that this Organization should be able to win all these battles by itself. If the twentieth century has taught us anything, it is that large-scale, centralized government does not work. It does not work at the national level, and it is even less likely to work at the global level.

Governments can bring about change, not by acting alone but by working together with other actors -- with commercial enterprises, and with civil society in the broadest sense.

Governments can define norms and principles, and plans of action, after carefully listening to the views of civil society. But then they need to work with appropriate partners to put those norms into practice.

Your Heads of State and Government have reaffirmed the central position of this Assembly as the chief deliberative, policy-making and representative organ of the United Nations, and have resolved to enable it to play that role effectively.

It is up to you to give effect to that resolution, by taking decisions which reflect the will of the great majority of Member States, and taking them when they are needed.

Consensus is highly desirable, but it need not mean waiting for absolute unanimity on every sub-clause, among 189 Member States. The minority -- often a very small minority -- should not withhold its consent unreasonably. Whatever we think of the veto in the

Security Council, it surely has no place in this Assembly. We can no longer afford to operate always at the level of the lowest -- and slowest -- common denominator.

It is up to you, likewise, to achieve the comprehensive reform of the Security Council that your Heads of State and Government have called for -- a reform that will make the Council more representative and legitimate, but also more effective.

In this connection, I draw your attention particularly to the request addressed to you by your Heads of State and Government to "consider expeditiously" the recommendations of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations.

As you know, the Panel's recommendations are intended, precisely, to make this Organization more effective in its primary task of keeping the peace.

- 3 - Press Release SG/SM/7544 12 September 2000

Some of them fall within the area of responsibility of the Security Council, which decided, during its summit level meeting last week, that it too would consider them "expeditiously".

Some fall fully within my own purview as Secretary-General -- and I and my staff have already started work on implementing them.

But the largest number call for decisions by this Assembly, not least because they have budgetary implications. I will shortly submit to you an implementation plan, in the hope that within a year we will see real change. Never again must the United Nations find itself without the means to protect those who have been encouraged to put their trust in it.

Not only in peace operations, but across the whole range of our activities, it is up to you to ensure that this Organization is provided, on a timely and predictable basis, with the resources it needs to carry out its mandates.

It is up to you to agree on the "clear rules and procedures" that will enable us in the Secretariat, by adopting the best management practices and technologies available, and by concentrating on the tasks that reflect your priorities, to make the best use of those resources.

And I would add that it is up to you to allocate those resources in a way that reflects your current priorities, rather than condemning us to operate with a budget frozen in time.

Above all, we must make best use of the Organization's human resources -- the men and women whose job it is to implement your decisions.

It is vital that we attract staff of the highest calibre, and give them full opportunity to develop their talents. It is even more vital that we give them better protection when they are sent to serve the cause of humanity in situations of conflict and danger.

I shall shortly submit proposals to you for improvements in both these areas -- human resources management, and the safety of personnel. I trust you will act on them promptly.

Ce sera également à vous de faire en sorte que l'Organisation continue d'être logée dans des locaux dignes d'elle. Aujourd'hui, notre Siège, cet ensemble magnifique dont l'élégante silhouette est connue aux quatre coins du monde, a besoin d'être remis en état et modernisé d'urgence. Nous ne pouvons pas continuer indéfiniment à parer au plus pressé, ce qui serait une solution de plus en plus coûteuse.

C'est pourquoi j'ai proposé un plan directeur dans lequel j'ai examiné plusieurs solutions possibles et envisagé différentes formules de financement. Il en ressort très clairement que de grands travaux de modernisation seront certes fort coûteux, mais que si nous ne changeons rien, les dépenses ne tarderont pas à être beaucoup plus lourdes encore, surtout les dépenses

- 4 - Press Release SG/SM/7544 12 September 2000

d'énergie. Je vous demande donc instamment de prendre des mesures nécessaires pendant qu'il est encore temps.

Enfin, Mesdames et Messieurs, et c'est loin d'être le moins important, c'est à vous qu'il incombe en grande partie de faire en sorte que les parlementaires, le secteur privé, les organisations non gouvernementales et la société civile en général aient davantage d'occasions d'apporter leur contribution aux activités de l'ONU, à la réalisation de ses objectifs et à l'exécution de ses programmes.

Vous me pardonnerez de répéter à ce sujet ce que j'écrivais dans mon Rapport du Millénaire. Les agences de la société civile ont apporté une contribution importante à la formulation et à la défense de normes mondiales.

Since I submitted the report, we have made headway on the specific proposals I made for new partnerships. We are bringing new information technologies within reach of more people in developing countries; and we are going to use those technologies to bring medical knowledge where it is most needed, and to ensure that help reaches the victims of disasters with a minimum of delay.

But we are not doing this alone. We are doing it in partnership with volunteers, with corporations and with philanthropic foundations. There is much, much more to be achieved through these and other kinds of partnership.

It is clear that the United Nations and the world's people have much to gain from opening the Organization further -- including the work of this Assembly - to such a vital source of energy and expertise.

One role of the United Nations is to be the forum where international norms are agreed and promulgated, and where all voices can be heard -- especially those of the poor and vulnerable, whose views and interests are too often ignored elsewhere.

Another role is to help form coalitions for change on the global level.

And, of course, the United Nations must continue to play the primary role assigned to it by its founders: that of keeping the peace.

What sort of organization can play these roles?

One that is open.

One that is flexible.

One that is efficient.

One that is representative of all the world's peoples, and enjoys legitimacy in their eyes.

Those are the qualities which I have done my best to cultivate in this Organization, since I became its Secretary-General. But the key decisions lie in your hands.

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