

Address as the current chairperson of the G77 and China at the 61st session of United Nations General Assembly

New York, 19 September 2006

Your Excellency, the President of the General Assembly, Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa,
Your Excellency, the Secretary-General Kofi Annan,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Once again, we have convened at this seat of the Organisation of the Peoples of the World, representing the entire humanity and coming from all corners of the world. Our pilgrimage this year is tinged with sadness because we also pay homage to one of the most outstanding servants of the United Nations, a native son of Africa, Kofi Annan, whose term of office will soon come to an end.

The G77 and China as well as my own country, South Africa, sincerely thank the Secretary-General for the selfless and dedicated work he carried out during one of the most challenging periods of this Organisation.

In the midst of increasing poverty and underdevelopment during an era of unprecedented wealth accumulation and technological advances and, as the river that divides the rich and the poor zones of the metaphorical global village ever widens, the Secretary-General of the United Nations never lost focus on the imperatives of our time.

We thank him for never losing sight of the fact that poverty and underdevelopment remain the biggest threats to the progress that has been achieved, and that equality among the nations, big and small, is central to the survival, relevance and credibility of this global organisation.

Your Excellencies, we are only six years into the 21st Century. Those who populate the poorest part of the regions of the world - Africa - have boldly declared that it will be an African Century. It is a century in which billions of the citizens of the developing world and other poor and marginalised people, would want to transform into a Century for all Humanity.

If the wishes of the majority of the world could turn into reality, this would be a century free of wars, free of internecine conflicts, free of hunger, free of preventable disease, free of want, free of environmental degradation and free of greed and corruption. Indeed, we began the century with great hopes for a better, peaceful and humane world.

Together, we crafted comprehensive plans and bold declarations to defeat the scourge of poverty and underdevelopment.

Together, we committed ourselves, with what seemed like renewed vigour, to transform the UN to reflect the modern reality that is defined by free, sovereign and equal nations.

However, six years into the 21st century dispassionate observers would dare us to achieve our noble and lofty objectives, pointing to the terrorists' acts that welcomed us into the new century. They would emphasise the unilateralism that threatens to negate the democratic advances of the last decades of the 20th century, and draw attention to renewed conflicts and wars that seem to compete with the destructive fury of the conflicts of the last century.

They would remind us that for a decade and more, some of the developed nations have consistently refused to implement the outcomes and agreements of this world body that would help to alleviate the wretchedness of the poor.

Thus, Madam President, when you correctly urge us to implement a global partnership for development, we, the members of G77 and China, who represent the poor people of the world, understand you to be communicating a message that we should make real the common commitments we solemnly made at this supreme organisation of the nations of the world.

Yet, this common commitment for a global partnership for development cannot be transformed into reality when the rich and powerful insist on an unequal relationship with the poor.

A global partnership for development is impossible in the absence of a pact of mutual responsibility between the giver and the recipient. It is impossible when the rich demand the right, unilaterally, to set the agenda and conditions for the implementation of commonly agreed programmes.

We who represent the poor, know as a matter of fact that these billions of poor people are increasingly becoming impatient because every year they hear us adopt declaration after declaration, and yet nothing practical is done to assuage the hunger pains that keeps them awake at night. Only few and selected agreements are implemented, with outcomes that are clearly insufficient to alleviate the excruciating pain of their children who cannot cry anymore because to do so is to invite more pain.

Those of us who were at the 14th Summit of the NAM in Havana heard this message very clearly, emanating from all the countries and organisations that spoke.

Those who are capable of listening should take note of what that great son of India and South Africa, Mahatma Gandhi, said on this matter: "The test of friendship is assistance in adversity, and that too, unconditional assistance. Co-operation which needs consideration is a commercial contract and not friendship. Conditional co-operation is like adulterated cement which does not bind."

Precisely because of the absence of a global partnership for development, the Doha Development Round has almost collapsed. Indeed, because the rich invoked, without shouting it, the slogan of an over-confident European political party of the 1960's, and directed this uncaring declaration to the poor of today - "I'm alright Jack!" - we have not implemented the Monterrey Consensus on Financing for Development, thus making it difficult for the majority of the developing countries, especially those in Africa, to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, and have reduced the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation to an insignificant and perhaps forgotten piece of paper.

Part of the problem with this unequal relationship is the imposition of conditions on developing countries and the constant shifting of the poles whenever the poor adhere to each and every one of those conditions.

Among other things, we have recently seen an outbreak of great social instability across Europe and other reactions of the poor to their miserable conditions in different parts of the world, always putting into question the image of seemingly harmonious well-woven tapestries of diverse groups because, in good measure, we continue to fail to implement our own decisions of the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance.

Your Excellencies, those who coined the slogan: "I'm alright Jack!" were communicating, whether consciously or not, a message and an attitude that said - 'I don't care about my neighbour as long as I and my family eat well and sleep peacefully' and that 'it is not my responsibility to ensure that my poor neighbour also eats well and sleeps peacefully'.

Today the attitude among some of the rich also communicates the same message to the rest of the world that: 'I'm alright Jack!', even when they are acutely aware that many in their neighbourhood die of hunger, of preventable diseases and abject poverty. This happens also in a situation of the cruel irony where resources flow from those who have little to those who have plenty.

Although the rich and the powerful know the miserable life circumstances of the poor and have solemnly committed themselves to the collective effort to reverse these conditions, their attitude and response resembles that of the Biblical Cain who, after killing his brother, Abel, and the Lord asked him "where is Abel your brother?", he replied that: "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

Perhaps, all of us, especially the rich, should heed the words of one of the great sons of the United States of America who perished because of his belief in equality and justice for all human beings, and whose civil rights movement is currently marking its golden jubilee.

Martin Luther King warned that: "As long as there is poverty in the world I can never be rich, even if I have a billion dollars. As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people in this world cannot expect to live more than twenty-eight or thirty years, I can never be totally healthy even if I just got a good check-up at Mayo Clinic. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way our world is made. No individual or nation can stand out boasting of being independent. We are interdependent."

The majority of the human race is entitled to ask the question whether the rich are responding the way they do because the further impoverishment of the poor is to the advantage of the rich, giving meaning to the old observation that the rich get richer as the poor get poorer.

As the divide between the rich and the poor widens and becomes a serious global crisis we see an increase in the concentration of economic, military, technological and media power.

Your Excellencies, something is seriously wrong when people risk life and limb travelling in suffocating containers to Western Europe in search of a better life.

Something is wrong when many Africans traverse, on foot, the harsh, hot and hostile Sahara Desert to reach the European shores.

Something is wrong when walls are built to prevent poor neighbours from entering those countries where they seek better opportunities.

Something is indeed wrong when all these people, whose fault is merely the fact that their lives are defined by poverty, try desperately to reach countries where they believe the conditions of their existence would improve, only to meet hostile, and at times, most barbaric and inhuman receptions.

Your Excellencies,

In part, the United Nations is unable to fulfil some of the objectives set by the founders in San Francisco because, in truth, it does not reflect the expansion of the global family of free nations. Because this organisation of the peoples of the world has grown to encompass the entire world, many had thought that it would be logical that this custodian of global democracy would itself serve as a beacon in our continuing quest for democracy in all our countries. Clearly, for the UN to continue occupying its moral high ground, it has to reform itself urgently, and lead by practical example as to what is meant to be democratic.

Even as we face the cold reality of the indifference of the many among the rich and powerful, this Organisation of the peoples of the world has continued to offer hope and the possibility of the fulfilment of the aspirations of the majority of the peoples of the world.

All of us, including those who are hesitant to implement the commonly agreed positions, agree that this Organisation has entrenched the correct understanding that development is both a right and is central to the advancement of all humanity.

In this regard, all of us, individually and collectively and as members of the UN, must do whatever is necessary to develop and implement policies and strategies aimed at the achievement of sustainable development.

It is important that international organisations such as the Bretton Woods institutions, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and others should, without any equivocation, seriously embark on the implementation of all the commitments that we have made as the international community.

This Organisation of the peoples of the world cannot merely note the unacceptable situation that Africa would not achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

We need further, focused and concrete programmes to accelerate development in Africa and avoid the possibility of that continent sinking further into the morass of poverty and underdevelopment.

Because we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, we have the responsibility to end the rhetoric and implement programmes that would ensure that all human beings live decent, humane and prosperous lives.

On behalf of G77 and China as well as my own country, South Africa, I take this opportunity to thank His Excellency, Jan Eliasson, for the great work he did in steering this organisation during the past year, as President of the General Assembly.

We are honoured to welcome Her Excellency, Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa as the President of the 61st Session of the General Assembly and wish her well in her important work. Madame President, we pledge to do whatever is necessary to make your work easier, so that through your efforts, the poor can regain full confidence in the ability of the UN to improve their conditions of life.

Everyday the masses cry out in pain, frustration and anger. Everyday they ask: is there anybody there who stops to hear their voices! Is there anybody there who listens to and is ready to respond to their heartfelt plea for the restoration of their dignity?

Thank you.