

Address at the 58th session of the United Nations General Assembly

23 September 2003

President of the General Assembly, Mr. Julian Hunte,
Secretary-General of the UN, Mr. Kofi Annan,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

May I congratulate you, Mr. President for assuming the mantle of the Presidency of this Session of the General Assembly and also thank the out-going President, Mr. Jan Kavan.

I would also like to echo what other speakers have said about the deaths of the dedicated UN workers who died in the bombing of the UN Headquarters in Baghdad last month, including Sergio Vieira de Mello, an outstanding international civil servant. When we met here last year, we were all concerned about what would happen to Iraq. At the same time, we were concerned about what role this organisation, the United Nations, would play in the resolution of the Iraq affair. Dramatic events since then have provided answers to these questions.

However, these dramatic events have raised important and disturbing questions about the very future of the United Nations. Central among these is the question - does the United Nations have a future as a strong and effective multi-lateral organisation, enjoying the confidence of the peoples of the world, and capable of addressing the matters that are of concern to all humanity! Quite correctly, as we meet here, this time, we are still preoccupied with the issue of the future of Iraq. I am certain that, in this regard, none of us wants to rehash the debate that took place on this matter in the period after the last General Assembly.

If for some time after that General Assembly we were concerned to provide answers to questions about the role of the United Nations on Iraq, today we have to answer questions about the impact of the Iraq affair on the future of the United Nations.

Matters have evolved in such a manner that, to our limited understanding, it seems extremely difficult to resolve the issue of the role of the United Nations in Iraq, unless we answer the question about the future of the UN as the legitimate expression of the collective will of the peoples of the world, the principal guarantor of international peace and security, among other global issues.

Put differently, we could say that what is decided about the role of the UN in Iraq will, at the same time, decide what will become of the UN in the context of its Charter, and the important global objectives that have been taken since the Charter was adopted.

This is not a case of the tail wagging the dog. Rather, history has placed at our feet an urgent and practical test case that obliges us to answer the question - what do we, collectively, want the United Nations to be! What do we do to distinguish the trees from the woods! In this regard, we must make the point directly that, as South Africans, we are partisan activists who campaign in favour of such a strong and effective United Nations. We do so because of the place our country and people occupy in the contemporary world. That place is defined by the fact that we are a developing country, whose central challenge is the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment, a challenge we share with the rest of the African continent of which we are an integral part.

Mr President, we believe that everything that has happened places an obligation on the United Nations to reflect on a number of fundamental issues that are of critical importance to the evolution of human society. We are convinced that this General Assembly would disappoint the expectations of the peoples of the world, and put itself in jeopardy if, for any reason whatsoever, it does not address these issues.

Accordingly what I might say, Mr President and Your Excellencies, might not constitute what is considered normal discourse in terms of the work that the General Assembly has to do, consistent with its rights and duties as defined by the UN Charter, and the conventions that have emerged since the Charter was adopted.

However, I trust that what I will say will not fall on deaf ears. But I must also make the point that everything I will say is not intended to attack or praise any particular country or group of countries. We speak as we do because we represent a people who are most sensitive to the imperatives of what the world decides, given our experience during a period when apartheid South Africa was, correctly, a matter of focused and sustained interest by the United Nations and the peoples of the world, including ordinary folk even in the most marginalized areas of our globe.

This organisation, and all of us, singly and collectively, has spoken and speaks frequently about the phenomenon of globalisation. Correctly, we talk of a global village, driven by recognition of the fact of the integration of all peoples within a common and interdependent global society. Certainly, humanity is more integrated today than it was when the United Nations was established more than fifty years ago.

I believe that there is no need for me to present any information to substantiate this commonly accepted and obvious conclusion.

However, many have drawn attention to the fact that whereas objective social processes have led to the emergence of the global village, all our political collectives have not yet succeeded to design the institutions of governance made necessary by the reality of the birth of this global village.

Correct observations have also been made that the use of the image and concept of a village does not imply that the residents of this village are equal.

The reality is that the same processes that bring all us closer together in a global village, are simultaneously placing the residents of the global village in different positions. Some have emerged as the dominant, and the rest as the dominated, with the dominant being the decision makers, and the dominated being the recipients and implementers of these decisions.

To the same extent that our political collectives have not designed the institutions responsive to the evolution of the global village, so have they failed to respond to the imbalance in the distribution of power inherent in contemporary global human society.

We speak here of power in all fields of human activity, including the political, economic, military, technological, social, intellectual, and so on.

Left to its internal and autonomous impulses, the process of globalisation will inevitably result in the further enhancement of the domination of the dominant and the entrenchment of the subservience of the dominated, however much the latter might resent such domination.

Among other things, this paradigm means that, naturally, the powerful will set the agenda for all residents of the global village. Again naturally, they will do this to advance their own interests. This will include the perpetuation of their dominant positions, to ensure the sustenance of their capacity to set the agenda of the global village, in the interest of their own neighbourhoods within this global village.

Inherent within this is, necessarily, reliance on the use of the superior power of which the dominant dispose, to achieve the objective of the perpetuation of the situation of the unequal distribution of power. In this situation, it is inevitable that the pursuit of power in itself, will assert itself as a unique legitimate objective, apparently detached from any need to define the uses of such power. This also signifies the deification of force in all its forms, as the final arbiter in the ordering of human affairs. However, from the

point of view of the disempowered, the struggle to ensure the use of such power to address their own interests becomes a strategic objective they cannot avoid. Necessarily this means that power would have to be redistributed. This would be done to empower the disempowered, and to regulate the use of power by those who are powerful.

And yet, by definition, the disempowered should not reasonably expect that their disempowerment gives them any possibility to have a decisive influence over the powerful. Logically, they should not entertain any dreams that they have the means to oblige the powerful to regulate the use of their power to achieve results that benefit all humanity, regardless of the impact of this on what the powerful might define as their national interest.

Thus we come back to what I said earlier. Because we are poor, we are partisan activists for a strong, effective and popularly accepted United Nations.

We take these positions because there is no way in which we could advance the interests of our people, the majority of whom are poor, outside the context of a strong, effective and popularly accepted United Nations. An autonomous process of globalisation, driven by its own internal regularities, can only result in the determination of our future within the parameters set by those who enjoy the superiority of power. The powerful will do this in their interest, which might not coincide with ours.

When this organisation was established fifty-eight years ago, necessarily, its objectives and institutions reflected both the collective global concerns as then perceived, and the then balance of power. Among other things, our esteemed Secretary General, Mr Kofi Annan, has drawn attention to the fact that the UN started off as an organisation of 51 states and is now composed of 191 states. Undoubtedly, the perceived and real collective global concerns of our day are, to some extent at least, different from those that prevailed more than fifty years ago, when this organisation was about a quarter of its present size.

For more than a decade, this organisation has been involved in discussions about its transformation. Once more, the Secretary General has reflected on this challenge. The truth is that our discussion has gone nowhere. Earlier this morning the Secretary General announced steps he will take to facilitate the adoption of decisions that will help all of us to effect the necessary and inevitable transformation of the United Nations. We support the decisions he announced.

One of the matters that must be addressed is the issue of the accepted national right to self-defence, and the implications of the exercise of this right in the light of the historic responsibilities of the United Nations to guarantee international peace and security.

In this regard, all of us face a challenge specific to our times. It arises out of the process of globalisation and the emergence of a global village. These phenomena have, among other things, resulted in the globalisation of the threat to the peace and security of all our states, not necessarily emanating from states that are bound by the rules we must all observe as members of the United Nations.

The global resolve to defeat such organisations as Al Qaeda has emerged out of our understanding that international aggression should not necessarily be expected to emanate from formal and recognised state institutions. We have all come to understand that, emanating from non-state institutions, such threat, as was most painfully demonstrated on September 11, 2001, would express itself as the most inhumane and despicable terrorism. Our collective experience, stretching from New York and elsewhere in the United States on September 11, 2001, reaching back to Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in Africa earlier still and more recently to Bali in Indonesia, to Morocco, to the conflict between Israel and Palestine, to Algeria, India, Russia and elsewhere, and even our own country, this experience tells us that this organisation, the UN, working in defence of the collective interest of the peoples of the world, must ensure that we act together to defeat the threat of terrorism, collectively defined.

At the same time, we have to take on board the conviction among some of our member states that they constitute special and particular targets of this global terrorism. Understandably, the argument is advanced that it would be unreasonable and irrational to expect such states not to act to deter such terrorist actions against themselves. None of us can defend international rules that prescribe that anyone of us should wait to be attacked, knowing, in specific ways, that we were going to be attacked by identified terrorists, and then act against those who had attacked us, with such horrendous cost as was experienced by the United States during the September 11 attacks.

I do not imagine that anyone of us would seek to impose such a costly and unsustainable burden on any of our member states, which would also violate the self-defence provisions of Article 51 of the UN Charter, to which our Secretary General has correctly drawn our attention.

We also have no choice but to deal with the brute reality that the reform process of the UN and all its organs, and other multi-lateral organisations, has to recognise the reality of the imbalance of power as represented by different countries and regions.

At the same time, we must proceed from the position that such distribution of power is not necessarily in the interest of the peoples of the world, or even in the interest of those who, today, have the power to determine what happens to our common world.

This includes acceptance of the fact that, depending on the place we occupy in the global community, we have different priorities. Among other things, the rich are concerned about ways and means to maintain the status quo from which they benefit. Practically, this means that all matters that threaten to destabilise this status quo must, necessarily, be anathema to such people. Such matters will therefore be an issue of principal concern to them. Necessarily and understandably, they will then seek to get the rest of the world to accept their assertion that the maintenance of the status quo must be a universal human preoccupation, precisely the kind of issue on which the United Nations must take a united position.

On the other hand, the poor are interested to change their condition for the better. Accordingly, they will not accept the maintenance of the status quo, which perpetuates their poverty. Accordingly, among other things, the poor billions of the world will argue for action by the UN to ensure the transfer of resources to themselves, which will enable them to extricate themselves from their condition of poverty and underdevelopment, consistent with the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, the objectives of the Johannesburg World Summit for Sustainable Development, and other international agreements.

Inevitably, this will run counter to the propositions of those who are more powerful than the poor, the governments, peoples and countries that keep them afloat with development assistance. These will require, whether this is stated or not, that the recipients of this assistance should understand that such assistance can dry up. This could happen if the impoverished recipients do not accept the outcomes prescribed by those who provide the means for poor governments to discharge their responsibility to provide the barest of normal services and goods expected of any government everywhere in the world, provided that they use the resources they have received to confirm the priorities set by the donors.

Important shifts in the global balance of power and global objectives have taken place since the United Nations was established forty-eight years ago. This organisation has not substantially changed in terms of its structures and mode of functioning, to reflect these changes. This has served as a recipe for an inevitable crisis, a disaster waiting to occur.

And so as we meet today, we are confronted by global challenges that this global organisation cannot solve. Impelled by the urgent issues of the day, some of the powerful will not wait for all of us to respond to the problems we have raised, and which they face. They will act to solve these problems. Their actions will make the statement that they do not need the United Nations to find solutions to these problems.

Simultaneously, this will make the practical statement that the United Nations is irrelevant to the solution of the most burning problems of our day.

The disempowered will continue to look to this organisation, understanding, correctly, that they are too weak to advance their interests singly, outside of the collective voice of the United Nations. In this regard, they expect that the UN will be informed by its founding documents and other solemn decisions it has taken since it was established, all of which have been approved by successive sessions of the United Nations General Assembly, at least.

Global poverty and underdevelopment are the principal problems that face the United Nations. Billions across the globe expect that this General Assembly will address this challenge in a meaningful manner. The masses of people of our world expect that the statements we will make at this Assembly, as representatives of various governments, will indicate a serious commitment to implement what we say.

The poor of the world expect an end to violence and war everywhere. They want an end to the killing that is taking too many Israeli and Palestinian lives. They want the Africans to stop killing one another, continuing to convey the message that we are incapable of living at peace among ourselves. They desire the realisation of the democratic objective, universally, that the people shall govern. They believe that we are seriously committed to the objective of the eradication of poverty and the provision of a better life for all. They think that we mean it when we say that we will not allow that the process of globalisation results in the further enrichment of the rich, and the impoverishment of the poor, within and between countries.

They believe us when we say that our collective future is one of hope, and not despair. They are keenly interested to know whether our gathering, the UN General Assembly, will produce these results. For us, collectively, to meet these expectations, will require that each and everyone of us, both rich and poor, both the powerful and the disempowered, commit ourselves practically to act, in all circumstances, in a manner that recognises and respects the fact none of us is an island, sufficient unto ourselves. This includes the most powerful. The latter face the interesting challenge, important to themselves in their national interest, that the poverty and disempowerment of the billions will no longer serve as a condition for their success and their possibility to prosper in conditions of peace.

What we have said today, may not be heard because we do not have the strength to have our voice heard. Tomorrow, we may be obliged to say - no more water, the fire next time! As the fires burn, the United Nations will die, consumed by the flames. So will the hopes of the poor of the world die, as they did at Cancun, Mexico, not so long ago. We must act together to say in our words and in our actions, as countries and as the United Nations, there will be water next time, and not fire!

I thank you.