

Speech at the 54th Session of the United Nations General Assembly

New York, September 20, 1999.

Mr President,
Mr Secretary General,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

On behalf of our Government and in my capacity as Chair of the Non-Aligned Movement, I wish to extend our sincere congratulations to you Dr Theo-Ben Gurirab, on your election as President of the General Assembly.

I would also like to thank you for the kind remarks you made about my country as you assumed your high position. We have worked together for many decades. Thanks in good measure to your statespersonship, as neighbours we live together in peace and have joined hands as equals to ensure the all-round fulfilment of both our peoples.

These experiences convince us that you will discharge your responsibilities as President of the General Assembly in a manner that will help humanity to make our common world a better place for all.

We are pleased that you will be working with the Secretary General, Kofi Annan, who has demonstrated unquestionable commitment to the realisation of the goals of this Organisation.

Mr President:

The Charter of this Organisation and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provide all of us with the vision towards which we should strive.

At the time these documents were adopted, they reflected the international determination to ensure that the catastrophe occasioned by the rise of fascism and Nazism should never recur. We recall them today because we believe that the time has come that determined measures are taken actually to ensure that they inform what happens in the common world we all share.

The central message they contain is expressed in the words of the Declaration of Human Rights:

"...the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom"

We believe that the time has come for all of us to ensure that we work together to reconstruct human society in a manner consistent with this perspective.

We further believe that what we have said constitutes a particular and historic challenge to those who occupy positions of political leadership in the modern era - those who, like us, will have the privilege to address this General Assembly.

Only time will tell whether we have the moral and intellectual courage in fact to rise to this challenge.

But this we feel we can say, that conditions exist in the world today for us successfully to pursue the vision contained in the UN documents to which I have referred.

What may be in short supply is the courage of the politicians, as opposed to an abundance of good-sounding rhetoric.

What are these conditions of which we speak!

The Cold War has come to an end. There is no sign anywhere of an ideology-driven contest among superpowers which dictates that each should seek to destroy the other in order to protect itself.

It is true that a number of countries still possess weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons, which constitute a threat. The only logical way to address this is vigorously to sue for universal disarmament and the destruction of such weapons.

Secondly, I believe it would be correct to say that the overwhelming majority of countries in the world have opted for democratic forms of government.

Having learnt from their own experiences, the nations have turned their backs on dictatorship. We cannot say that such dictatorships do not exist or that no attempt will be made in future to establish them.

But we can make bold to say that these exceptions prove the rule rather than disprove the proposition we are trying to advance. The combination of these two factors should lead to three conclusions, at least.

The first is that there should be no need on the part of any country to seek to establish spheres of influence as a supposed necessary condition for the advancement of its national interests.

Secondly, the very sustenance of democracy across the globe requires that in every democratic country the ordinary people should feel that they actually do enjoy the right to determine their destiny.

In other words, no country should be required to restrict its exercise of this right simply because some other, more powerful, country dictates that this should be so.

Thirdly, these circumstances create the possibility for a more democratic system of international governance, as would be reflected by a correct restructuring of this very Organisation.

In any case, the process of globalisation necessarily redefines the concept and practice of national sovereignty. The frontiers of that sovereignty are being pushed back, especially as regards the smaller countries of the world, such as our own.

As this happens, inevitably, so does it become necessary that a compensatory movement takes place, towards the reinforcement of the impact of these countries on the system of global governance, through the democratisation of the system of international relations.

The developments we have spoken of also suggest that perhaps, and depending on what we all do, humanity has never had as bright a prospect for durable world peace and security as it does today.

The mere spread of democracy throughout the world speaks of a greater commitment among the nations to the resolution of national and international conflicts by peaceful means.

I am certain that when HE President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, current Chairperson of the OAU, addresses the Assembly, he will report on the important decision recently taken at the Algiers Summit of the OAU to exclude from its ranks, with effect from the next Summit, all military regimes that may still exist on the African Continent.

A further decision was taken to assist such countries resolutely to move towards a democratic system of government.

The developments on which we have commented would suggest that this Organisation has a responsibility to focus especially on the objective contained in Article 1 of its Charter:

"to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace...and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace..."

This imposes a solemn and supreme responsibility on the United Nations to work for the prevention of conflicts, and to endeavour to resolve them so that a durable peace can be established. Sometimes, our response to conflicts has been to wait for them to develop into violence, and even wars, and subsequently to intervene through costly peace keeping operations. These, at times, serve to freeze those conflicts, perpetuate polarisation, and make their timely resolution more difficult.

Moreover, the requirement on the United Nations to make such interventions to prevent the outbreak of hostilities, imposes an obligation on the UN that it should be seen by governments and peoples as a truly even-handed interlocutor and peacemaker.

It can only attain this if it works genuinely "to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples..." as stated in its Charter.

If we are indeed seriously committed to these critical objectives of peace and democracy in the world, then we have no excuse to permit the further postponement of the meaningful restructuring of the United Nations.

If we were honest with ourselves, we would admit that what is blocking progress is the desire to accommodate what are perceived as new power relations, to re-institutionalise relations of inequality within the UN in an amended form.

This is based on the thesis that the institutionalisation of such relations has precedence over the founding principle of this Organisation, of respect for the principle of equal rights among the nations.

In the situation of the Cold War and the prevalence of dictatorship in many countries, the politics of power might have been seen as the only path to survival.

The management of the world today, through the exercise of such power, however modified, will itself subvert the objectives of democracy and peace, spawning pretenders to the throne at global, continental and regional levels.

Simultaneously as the UN focuses on the critical question of the prevention of conflict, so must it attend to such issues as the elimination of weapons of mass destruction, the implementation of the ban on anti-personnel mines, the removal of mines in those countries which face this problem and the control of the proliferation of small arms.

Of course, none of these proposals gainsay the need for the UN to act with all necessary vigour to help end all existing conflicts of which it is seized. These include the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Western Sahara, East Timor, Eritrea and Ethiopia, Kosovo, and others.

Mr President:

We started off with a quotation from the Declaration of Human Rights, which speaks of affirming the dignity and worth of the human person, the promotion of social progress and securing a better life for all.

We argued that conditions exist for movement towards the realisation of the objectives spelt out in that Declaration. It is a matter of common cause among all of us that the levels of poverty, ignorance and disease that continue to afflict billions across the globe constitute a direct denial of the dignity and worth of the human person to which we have committed ourselves.

I am certain that we would also agree that the process of globalisation has also been accompanied by growing inequality within and among countries. We have also seen how movements of short-term capital have produced disastrous economic consequences in some countries.

As with the challenges of peace and democracy, it is our firm belief that sufficient resources exist within the world economy actually to address the social progress and the better life for all, for which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls.

Further to this, science and technology continue to develop in such a way that it is difficult to believe that, taken together with the large concentrations of capital that characterise the world economy, the means do not exist within human society to make the required impact on poverty, ignorance and disease.

Indeed, it can be argued quite rationally that international peace, democracy and prosperity are a necessary condition for the further rapid growth of the world economy, and with it the further expansion of the corporations both small and big, which require global markets.

Similarly, the revolution in information and communication technology, a critical driver of the process of globalisation, both enables and calls for higher levels of education and standards of living among the billions who constitute the human population.

However, it is clear that there is no automatic or inherent mechanism within the operation of the markets to enable both capital and technology to make the sort of impact we are talking about on all countries of the globe.

When we say this, we should not be taken to mean that we are contemptuous of all that has been said about what each country needs to do to create the conditions conducive to investment and technology transfers.

Nor should it be taken to mean that we are re-opening the debate about the role of markets in the allocation of resources. What we are saying is that the functioning of the markets does not and cannot exclude conscious interventions being made, both to increase economic opportunities and to raise the standards of living and the life possibilities of many in the world denied their human dignity by the scourge of poverty.

In his interesting book, "Living On Thin Air", the British author, Charles Leadbeater, writes:

"The new (knowledge driven) economy needs a mobilising vision and institutions fashioned to make it real. Bit by bit, our institutions are changing through reform, reorganisation and restructuring - but the process is much too slow, haphazard and piecemeal - it must become more conscious, imaginative and radical."

Once more, the matter turns on the will of the political leaders actually to discover among themselves the moral and intellectual courage to do what is correct and necessary.

What is correct and necessary also requires that in this field as well, affecting socio-economic matters, we review the functioning of all multi-lateral institutions, including those that belong within the UN family.

This would be done to ensure that these too reflect the very necessary imperative of the democratisation of the international system of governance.

The UN documents to which we referred earlier give us the starting point.

Accordingly, we believe that there is no need for anyone among us to rediscover a new vision that should inform our actions to build the new world which affirms the dignity and worth of the human person.

What is necessary is that we match the beliefs we profess with the necessary action.

We speak of action that will, practically, address the related issues of peace, democracy and development.

I am certain that such a practical programme of action would meet the aspirations not only of the members of the Organisation of African Unity and the Non-Aligned Movement of which we are a member.

It would also respond to the most deep-seated feelings of the peoples of the developed North who can have no interest in conflict, oppression and poverty, even if these occur beyond the borders of their own countries.

It also goes without saying that the democratic systems in which we operate would also require that, through committed advocacy, we secure the support of the electors for what should be a Programme of Action of the United Nations for the 21st Century.

The evolution of human society has presented the world leaders who will stand at this podium with new possibilities to move our globe a giant step forward towards a new actuality of which the poor and the powerless dream everyday.

It would be to betray these millions if we do not act to turn their dream into reality. Let future generations not say that because of the force of inertia, we failed to act!

Thank you.