

**Statement by
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**On the occasion of the general debate of the
59th Session of the United Nations
General Assembly**

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There are some matters about which we all agree. One of these is that later this year we will receive the important report that will be tabled by the High Level Panel of Threats, Challenges and Change which was constituted by our Secretary General. The other is that next year we will mark the 10th anniversaries of the Copenhagen Social Summit and the Beijing Women's Summit, and discuss their outcomes. The third matter about which we all agree is that next year we will observe the 5th anniversary of the adoption of the historic Millennium Declaration.

We will also agree that we took all these initiatives, the convening of the Social, Women's and Millennium Summits, and the constitution of the High Level Panel, because we were of one mind that we had a number of problems that needed to be solved.

In the Millennium Declaration, we used inspiring words to sum up our response to these problems. We said: "We have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level. As leaders we have a duty therefore to all the world's people, especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs." We went on to say, "We are determined to establish a just and lasting peace all over the world in accordance with the purposes and principles of the Charter."

We also said: "(Our efforts to make globalisation fully inclusive and equitable) must include policies and measures, at the global level, which correspond to the needs of developing countries and economies in transition and are formulated and implemented with their effective participation." To this we added the commitment that, "We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanising conditions of extreme poverty. We are committed to making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want."

Naturally, we have no choice but to agree that we did say all these things, and would undoubtedly agree that we meant what we said. I trust that this would not mark the end of the range of issues over which we would speak with one voice.

I say this because when I have asked myself the question - have we achieved the goals we set ourselves? - I have found it impossible not to answer that we have failed. There may very well be others among us who will take a different view and say that a good beginning has been made, and therefore that it is too early to say we have failed.

But I am certain that if we say to those affected by violence and war that we have made a good beginning towards the establishment of a just and lasting peace all over the world, they will not believe us. I am equally certain that if we say to those who, everyday, go to bed hungry, that we have made a good beginning towards freeing the entire human race from want, they will also not believe us. I would make bold to say that the vision of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level we enunciated in this imposing forum four years ago resonates among the ordinary people who are victims of hunger and war as a beautiful dream that will inevitably be deferred.

Does this mean that when we made the promises we made, we deliberately intended to tell the billions of ordinary people a lie? The answer to that question is obviously no! Did we speak as we did simply because talk is easy and cheap? Again the answer to that question is obviously no!

The question must therefore arise as to why the grandeur of our words and the vision they paint - of a world of peace, free of war, a world characterised by shared prosperity, free of poverty - has not produced the grand results we sincerely sought and seek!

It would seem to me that the answer to that question lies in the fact that we have, as yet, not seriously confronted the difficult issues that relate to the uses and perhaps the abuses of power.

Yesterday our Secretary General, the Honourable Kofi Annan, spoke eloquently about the three thousand year old code of Hammurabi, and said "That code was a landmark in humanity's struggle to build an order where, instead of might making right, right would make might." We took it that the Secretary General was, in his own elegant way, drawing our attention to the central question of our day - of the uses and abuses of power!

Contemporary human society is characterised by a gross and entrenched imbalance in the distribution of power. That power is held and exercised by human beings. As human beings, the powerful share many things with the powerless. Together, the powerful and the disempowered share common human needs to eat, to drink water, to be protected from the elements, to dream, to love, to laugh, to play, to live. But life itself tells us that all that and only that describes what human beings share. The rest, the relations among us as social beings, is defined by our varied access to power and its exercise. Without fear of contradiction, I have said that we all agree that later this year, we will receive the Report of the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change.

I am equally convinced that, depending on where we stand relative to the power equation, we will hold radically different views about what constitutes humanity's most serious threats and challenges, and therefore what must be changed to respond to that perceived reality.

Both the powerful and the disempowered will undoubtedly agree that terrorism and war represent a serious threat to all humanity. They will agree that we were right to make the commitment in the Millennium Declaration to work for "a just and lasting peace all over the world in accordance with the purposes and principles of the Charter."

Many of those who have already addressed the Assembly have correctly drawn our attention to many instances of terrorism and war to which we are all opposed. They have spoken of the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the African and American lives these claimed, of the heinous 9/11 outrage in this city, the acts of terrorism in Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Spain, Israel, Gatumba in Burundi, Beslan in the Russian Federation, and elsewhere.

They have correctly drawn our attention to the violent conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, the Sudan, Palestine, Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and elsewhere, and other unsolved problems such as self-determination for the people of Western Sahara, that cry out for a solution. Both the powerful and the disempowered agree and will agree that the international community must act together, successfully to confront these situations, and therefore the threat and challenge of terrorism and war. However, the powerful will also make the additional determination that terrorism and war constitute central and principal threat and challenge that human civilisation faces. They will make the determination that because, almost by definition, the terrorists target them simply because they are powerful, they have no logical choice but to identify terrorism as the central and principal threat and challenge they face, and to which they must respond. Because of the space they occupy relative to the power equation, what they decide will necessarily constitute the global decision of what constitutes the central, principal and most urgent threat and challenge to human society, necessitating various changes in the global system of governance. What they will decide will translate into a set of obligatory injunctions, issued by this Organisation, which all member nations will have to accept and implement.

Both the powerful and the disempowered will undoubtedly also agree that poverty, want and underdevelopment constitute serious problems that all humanity must confront. Many of those who have already addressed the Assembly have correctly drawn our attention to the reality of poverty that billions across the globe continue to experience.

Among other things, they have correctly reminded us of the fact that some countries are poorer today than they were a decade ago. They have pointed to the virtual certainty that we will fail to meet the Millennium Development Goals we set ourselves four years ago.

Both the powerful and the disempowered agree and will agree that the international community must act together, successfully to confront this situation, and therefore the threat and challenge of poverty and underdevelopment. However, the disempowered, who are also the poor of the world, will also make the additional determination that poverty and underdevelopment constitute the central and principal threat and challenge that human civilisation faces.

They will make the determination that because they are the daily victims of deprivation and want, which claim lives of millions every year, translating into cold statistics about shortened life expectancy, deprivation and want are central and principal threat and challenge that humanity faces, necessitating changes in the global system of governance effectively to respond to this reality.

But because they are powerless, these billions, the overwhelming majority of the same humanity that needs to eat, to drink water, to be protected from the elements, to dream, to love, to laugh, to play, to live, will have no possibility to persuade this Organisation, mockingly described in the Millennium Declaration as "the most universal and most representative organisation in the world", to translate what they have concluded, into obligatory injunctions, issued by this Organisation, which all member nations will have to accept and implement.

If, for a moment, we resist the temptation to speak in parables or in tongues, for fear that we might be punished for telling the truth, we must say that all this produces a stark and simple reality that reflects the distribution of power and wealth in contemporary human society.

The wealthy and powerful feel mortally threatened by the fanatical rage of the terrorists, correctly. And they have the power both to respond to this present and immediate danger with all the might of which they dispose, and, because they are mighty, the possibility to determine for all humanity that what they decide is the principal threat they confront is the principal threat that all humanity faces.

The poor and powerless feel threatened by a permanent hurricane of poverty, which is devastating their communities as horrendously as Hurricane Ivan destroyed the Caribbean island state of Grenada. But, tragically, precisely because they are poor, they do not have the means to respond to this present and immediate danger. Neither do they have the power to determine for all humanity that what they decide is the principal threat they confront, is also the principal threat that all humanity faces, including the rich and powerful.

In the Millennium Declaration we spoke of the need to implement "policies and measures, at the global level, which correspond to the needs of developing countries and economies in transition and are formulated and implemented with their effective participation."

Perhaps the mistake we made was to assume that the contemporary distribution of power in human society would permit of this outcome, such that regardless of this fundamental consideration, it would be possible for the concerns of the poor to take precedence on the global agenda and the global programme of action. We comforted or perhaps deluded ourselves with the thought that this Organisation is "the most universal and most representative organisation in the world", afraid to ask the question - is it?

Every year many of us who have spoken and will speak from this rostrum make an annual pilgrimage to this great and vibrant city to plead the cause of the poor of the world, hopeful that this time our voices will be heard. Every year, after a few days, we pick up our bags to return to the reality of our societies, whose squalor stands out in sharp contrast to the splendour of New York and this majestic precinct that constitutes the headquarters of the United Nations Organisation.

In the aftermath, resolutions are passed. Again and again our Permanent Representatives, the Excellencies with Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Powers, report that the resolutions oblige us to act to thwart the deadly plans of murderous terrorist gangs. Again and again their Excellencies report that yet another appeal has been made to the mighty and the lowly alike, voluntarily to respond to the cries of the wretched of the earth.

Your Excellency, President Jean Ping, we are truly proud and inspired by the fact that you preside over the proceedings of this 59th General Assembly, because we know that you will discharge your obligations as a son of the poor of the world should. We are moved by the fact that you had as your predecessor, President Julian Hunte, who also understood intimately what has to be done to ensure that the United Nations becomes, in reality, "the indispensable common house of the entire human family."

As an Israeli said to us at our own headquarters in Pretoria a fortnight ago, it is perhaps time that we the poor and powerless abandon our wheelchairs and begin to walk unaided. Perhaps this will help to build the social order of which Hammurabi and the Honourable Kofi Annan spoke, in which right would make, might and not might, right.