

The secretary-general

Remarks upon receiving an honorary degree from the Catholic University of Leuven

Leuven, Belgium, 28 May 2015

Bonjour. Hallo.

It is a great pleasure and honor for me to be with you today. Thank you for your hospitality.

It is a great honor to be visiting Leuven.

I am especially privileged to receive an honorary degree from this renowned University, a university with centuries of history that occupies an important place in the cultural and intellectual life of Belgium, Europe and the world.

I know that in addition to me, you are also recognizing the work of the United Nations around the world for our work on peace, development and human rights. I accept this honor on behalf of the many dedicated UN staff who bring the UN Charter to life.

And I'm also honored to follow in the footsteps of my distinguished predecessor Secretaries-General, Trygve Lie, the first Secretary-General of the United Nations. I'm sure that my predecessors will be very happy in spirit that I'm receiving this honorary degree from this distinguished university.

The United Nations Charter was adopted 70 years ago in San Francisco. Belgium's imprint on our work dates back to those beginnings. Paul-Henri Spaak, one of your country's leading statesmen, headed the Belgian delegation to the San Francisco conference and the Preparatory Commission of the United Nations – and he then became the first President of the United Nations General Assembly. This is a very historic contribution Belgium has made to the birth of the United Nations and we are deeply grateful.

Belgians are deeply aware of why we have and need a United Nations. The Charter's preamble proclaims our main objective: "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow" to humankind. The first of those untold sorrows brought carnage to Flanders Fields, not far from here, and too much of Belgium.

I know that Leuven suffered grievously: the town was largely destroyed, and the university library lost hundreds of thousands of precious historical books. It is fitting that today the University attaches special importance to the protection of cultural heritage. The threat to the irreplaceable ruins of Palmyra in Syria today shows the continuing relevance of that work.

The second of those untold sorrows was in its dying days as the United Nations was being born.

This year's 70th anniversary of the United Nations is a good moment to reflect on the past, but even more importantly, a time to have a conversation about what we can do to build a better future. That is what I would like to have with you today.

Distinguished faculty,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Belgium is not only a founding member of the United Nations - it is also a country with an active global presence today.

Belgium works in the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission to promote peace in the Central African Republic. It is among the top 20 contributors to the United Nations regular and peacekeeping budgets.

Belgium's official development aid helps promote African development, women's rights and environmental protection in some of the world's most vulnerable countries.

Belgian leaders have indicated a wish to contribute more personnel to our peacekeeping, political and peacebuilding missions. We look forward to that deeper engagement.

We need Belgium and all countries - and all our partners in business, academia and civil society - to step up this year.

We are calling this year, 2015, a year for global action, a once-in-a-generation opportunity to put our world and people on a more peaceful, sustainable and equitable footing.

In September in New York, the international community, together with the world's leaders, will adopt a new sustainable development agenda, including a set of Sustainable Development Goals, which will be called SDGs, instead of MDGs [Millennium Development Goals]. The new agenda will build on the gains of the past two decades, when hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of extreme poverty. We want to finish the job while going further to build effective institutions, stable societies and lives of dignity for all.

In December in Paris, countries must adopt a new and meaningful climate change agreement. Climate change is happening much, much faster than we think. The consequences could affect the full range of human needs - health, food, water and national security. At the same time, there are solutions. Many businesses and governments are already seeing the benefits of climate action. Paris can help us make a much-needed transition to low-carbon, resilient economies that provide prosperity while protecting the planet.

Before both of these events, in July in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the global community hopes to agree on a framework of financing for sustainable development to ensure we have the resources and technology to make our promises a reality.

These are three global meetings but one universal agenda. These three stops - Addis Ababa, New York and Paris - give us the last chance to avoid the worst impacts of climate change and our best chance to end poverty. We are the first generation that can put an end to poverty and we are the last generation that can put an end to climate change, so we [must] address climate change.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These opportunities coincide with a time of unease for the human family.

The world faces multiple crises. We are in the fifth year of a devastating conflict in Syria that continues to worsen. Humanitarian suffering in Yemen is affecting millions of people. These and other conflicts, along with poverty, persecution and other ills, have generated at least 50 million refugees and displaced persons – the largest ever number of refugees since the end of the Second World War.

The United Nations is working hard to address these challenges.

Our peacekeepers, humanitarian workers and mediation experts are all engaged. A high-level panel is currently assessing the state of our peace operations in order to keep pace with changing threats.

We are developing a comprehensive plan to prevent violent extremism. Last month, I convened religious leaders from around the world at the United Nations to promote tolerance, reconciliation and dialogue. We must take care to ensure that our responses do not make problems worse. It was quite an encouraging, inspirational meeting [I had recently] with religious leaders from around the world. We thought that in addressing violent extremism and terrorism, I believe that there is clearly an important role played by religious leaders and educators. Teachers, professors and religious leaders. They should tell and teach, their followers, their students, the correct meaning of mutual respect. How to live together harmoniously, with reconciliation and [in] peace. How we can make this society peaceful. I am counting on professors and teachers - starting from primary school, middle school, high school and colleges - they should teach their pupils and students the correct way so that they can become global citizens. Religious leaders, they all reaffirmed their commitment [to this].

The United Nations is also strengthening its efforts to prevent human rights violations. Through painful experiences, we have learned hard lessons. We know that violations of human rights are often warning signs of much worse to come. The Human Rights Up Front initiative aims to strengthen early action, and to address problems before they escalate into atrocities.

The challenge of migration, which is happening here on the European continent and in Southeast Asia, has taken on new urgency with tragic situations in the Mediterranean and Southeast Asia. Migrants are desperately trying to find a better life, but fall prey to smugglers and perilous journeys. I know we have all been saddened to see so many men, women and children lose their lives in the Mediterranean. Our efforts are aimed at saving lives but also resolving the conflicts and poverty that lead people to flee in the first place. The issue of migration had been one of the top issues which I have been discussing during the last three days during my visit to the European Union and Belgium. Even this morning, I had a very serious talk with Prime Minister [Charles] Michel and also the Commissioner of the European Union [on migration].

We are also working at a deeper level, trying to nurture new generations of global citizens. Last week, I participated in the World Education Forum, which was held in Korea with UNESCO [the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization]. I know from my own life the overarching importance of education. I believe I am one of the people who got the most benefit from a good education! From being very poor growing up, living in a war-torn country, now standing before you as Secretary-General of the United Nations, I believe that education has brought me here. I was poor and we were all poor, but we were thirsty for knowledge and education. And when the country recovered, Korea invested in education and was ready for faster industrialization, about to take off, we had a skilled and educated workforce in Korea, readily available, ready to step in and do the job.

Today, around the world, too many millions of children are out of school, and too many others do not get an education that matches the needs of today's economy. My Global Education First Initiative is striving to promote access to education, quality and global citizenship.

In that spirit, I would like to thank Leuven University for being a valued member of the United Nations Academic Impact initiative, which I launched, that aims to align the great power of education and knowledge with the objectives of the United Nations.

The United Nations is also working more closely with young people. I appointed the first-ever United Nations Envoy on Youth. His name is Ahmad Alhendawi of Jordan. He is just 30 years old. He says young people drive change but are not in the driver's seat. I agree. I have been pressing governments to give them the driver's license that will enable them to participate in a bigger way.

Together, we have made important gains in focusing attention on youth. Yet we also see too many young people who are jobless, frustrated and under attack – from the girls kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria, to the students killed in Kenya and Pakistan by extremists, and those exploited on farms and in factories.

Tomorrow, at United Nations Headquarters in New York, Government representatives and young people will gather to mark the 20th anniversary of the World Programme of Action for Youth. People often tell young people that they are the leaders of tomorrow. But many are already actively working for peace and fighting injustice. We need to harness that power for the global good.

Distinguished professors,
Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Students,

Here at Leuven University, students are earning one of the great gifts a person can have: a good, quality education. I know that is hard work, but I have another homework assignment for you: Become global citizens with global vision. Act with passion and compassion. Challenge your leaders, your professors, your presidents, prime ministers and CEOs. Tell them that you have a responsibility to make this world more peaceful and prosperous. Tell them you want to be at the table with them - negotiating table - taking part in the decisions affecting your lives. Use your voices to claim your rights and I will work as your ally.

Now, I'd like to say just a few words about what the Rector has said about my first [introduction to] the United Nations. I was just a 12-year-old schoolboy in 1956. There was an uprising in Hungary. We didn't know where Hungary was at that time, it was in the middle of the Cold War. Hungary belonged to the communist camp and we belonged to the western camp. There were a lot of demonstrations among Korean citizens - the people in Hungary were being oppressed and killed, many students were being oppressed. Without knowing much, we participated in demonstrations, and as representative of my school, I read out a statement, letter, to then-Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld. I read out, "Dear Secretary-General of the United Nations, you must help the students and young people and people who are genuinely fighting for democracy." At that time, it was just three, four years after the Korean War, so we were eagerly working for and striving for freedom and liberty and peace. I didn't know whether that message was delivered or not to the Secretary-General. When I was elected and was making an acceptance speeches on October 13 [in 2006] - that was my acceptance speech to the General Assembly - I thought about that. And I asked Member States, during my time as Secretary-General, I sincerely hope that no students will send me that kind of letter, asking me to intervene in conflict areas where students and people, their freedom and liberty and human rights are abused. Sadly, I'm receiving those letters, many letters, many calls, from young people, just citizens. There are still many crises, many people have been killed. While sad, that really motivates me and humbles me again and again. I'm working day and night towards peace and stability.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This cannot be done by the United Nations alone. We need the full support of every

citizen in the world, their hands together. As I said, this is a very important year for humanity. We have to shape the future development agenda, which will put us all on a sustainable path, where all the citizens of the world can live peacefully, harmoniously, where their dignity can be respected.

With this honorary degree, you give me another moral mission and I accept this moral mandate and mission as Secretary-General. I know that you asked the United Nations to do much more, and I am committing myself to work for world peace, development, and human rights.

And let us work together, ladies and gentlemen, to make this world better for all, and I thank you for this honor.

Thank you very much.