

76th UN General Assembly

Speech by Alexander De Croo,
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New York, 24 Sep 2021

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

How encouraging to see the General Assembly meet in person again. I felt a sense of relief when I stepped into this solemn hall. Don't we all yearn to get "back to normal"?

But is this sense of relief justified? And what is the "normal" we can hope for?

Can we feel relieved when COVID-19 is still all around us and too many people are not vaccinated?

Can we be relieved when, for a growing number of people, climate change is becoming a matter of life and death?

Is there room for relief when human rights are being challenged in so many places? All over the world, people who are perceived as 'different' are confronted with hate speech and hate crimes. With discrimination and abuse.

And can we really feel relief when the “new normal” for women and girls in Afghanistan, is to go home, keep silent and stay inside?

No, we cannot.

Let me quote Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, who was murdered exactly sixty years ago last week: “the weakness of one is the weakness of all, and the strength of one is the strength of all.”

That is why Belgium remains strongly committed to multilateralism, to an international order based on the rule of law, the founding principle of our United Nations. Only through common action will we build common strength. Only through multilateralism, will we provide long-term answers to today’s complex crises.

Which vulnerabilities, then, require our common action? I see three.

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The first vulnerability is COVID-19. We need to bring this pandemic to an end.

It is now almost two years since our lives were turned upside down by an unprecedented health crisis. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to health care workers in Belgium and elsewhere who continue to battle this deadly virus.

Belgium is among the top vaccinated countries in the world: 85% of our adult population is fully vaccinated. But Belgium is also a leading exporter of vaccines, accounting for two thirds of all European exports.

We are one of the world's vaccine powerhouses and we acted like one, by keeping trade lanes open and exporting over 530 million vaccines to the rest of the world, without ever imposing an export ban.

If we are to overcome this pandemic, vaccine solidarity is a crucial condition, since no one will be safe until everyone is safe.

It is therefore unacceptable that today less than four percent of Africa's population is fully vaccinated. As Hammarskjöld said: the weakness of one is the weakness of all. As long as the virus continues to circulate, the risk of new variants is there, and no one will be safe.

COVAX is the best mechanism to strengthen vaccination solidarity and close the global vaccination gap. Belgium has already donated 1.5 million doses, and by the end of the year, we will donate a total of four million vaccines. With close to three billion euro pledged to COVAX, the European Union is one of its major donors.

But we must do more.

We must also boost local vaccine production, through technology transfer and sharing of knowledge. That is one of Team Europe's objectives. At least one billion euro will be invested to this end.

And as we speak, a Belgian private company is working with partners in Senegal to start local vaccine production.

We also must prepare for the next pandemic, even if the present one is far from over. A new pandemic treaty will allow us to be better prepared, build resilient health systems and increase access to decent health care and quality medicines. And we need a transformed World Health Organization that is ‘fit for purpose’ to lead these efforts.

The coronavirus took the lives of nearly five million people. But it also had a devastating impact on our Agenda 2030. It halted and even reversed many of the recent, positive developments. Extreme poverty is on the rise again for the first time this century. Economies were pushed into recession. Fragile countries were struck harder than others.

Yet, giving up is not an option. As the Secretary-General said in his report “Our Common Agenda”, we should “usher in a new era of universal social protection”. Not one country can cope with these unprecedented challenges on its own.

That is why ‘Team Europe’ is pooling efforts and resources to assist the most vulnerable countries. Belgium is proud to be part of this collective European effort.

So, let’s not lose courage. Yes, we must build back. But we are faced with an important choice, an opportunity even: do we continue with business as usual, or do we do things differently?

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Cela m'amène à une deuxième vulnérabilité qui requiert notre attention : la crise climatique et l'urgente nécessité de placer la durabilité au cœur de tous nos efforts.

Le rapport publié le mois dernier par le Groupe d'experts intergouvernemental sur l'évolution du climat est sans équivoque : l'augmentation de la concentration de dioxyde de carbone et de la température mondiale est sans précédent. Toutes les régions du monde sont maintenant témoins des effets néfastes du dérèglement climatique, et plus rapidement que prévu.

Cet été, l'Europe et mon pays ont été durement touchés par des conditions météorologiques extrêmes. Ce sont 41 de nos compatriotes qui ont perdu la vie lors de ces inondations, les pires qu'ait connu notre pays. Notre nation était sous le choc. Face à la brutalité des forces de la nature, nous étions nombreux à nous sentir tout petits.

Nous allons reconstruire. Mais ce ne sera pas suffisant. Nous ne pouvons pas nous croiser les bras et attendre les prochaines inondations, la prochaine vague de chaleur ou la prochaine sécheresse extrême qui tuera à nouveau. Nous devons agir et nous devons le faire maintenant.

This makes the UN Climate Conference, COP26 in Glasgow, the most important meeting of recent years.

With the Green Deal, the European Union intends to be climate neutral by 2050 and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030. We hope that more countries will follow Europe's ambitions.

This transition to sustainability is not only a cost. It is also a major economic opportunity. It triggers innovation and drives new growth. It is the future our youth demands.

That's why Belgium will double its wind energy capacities in the North Sea, to remain one of the global leaders in offshore wind energy production. We will increase investments in renewables. And we have the clear ambition to become one of the most important hubs in clean hydrogen supply.

Our common mission in Glasgow is crystal clear: we need to do 'whatever it takes' to limit global warming to the Paris target of one and a half degrees.

Building the resilience of the most fragile countries will be an important part of this effort. That is why we must deliver on our financing commitment of 100 billion dollars and why Belgium plans to increase its contribution to international climate finance.

It is, quite literally, a matter of life and death.

If we fail to act on the climate crisis, we will not only lose more lives, but global tensions, instability and insecurity will increase.

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This brings me to the third vulnerability: our international security.

Twenty years ago, the attacks of 9/11 did not only change this city. They changed the world. Five years ago, my country was also attacked by terrorists. Like France, we are bringing terrorists to justice. But we have not defeated terrorism yet. Terrorists continue to claim innocent lives, as they did recently at Kabul airport.

Belgium is one of the founding members of the Coalition against ISIS. We actively participate in the fight against terrorism. With military deployment and with stabilization and reconstruction efforts through UNDP.

Throughout the Sahel, our bilateral cooperation encompasses both defence and development. Indeed, security is not sufficient to ensure stability.

And we cannot close our eyes to the aggravating humanitarian situation. The failure to prevent conflict often results in the failure to protect human dignity, with people losing everything.

My country is a major humanitarian donor. Belgium's budget for humanitarian aid was 200 million euro last year. During our Security Council tenure, we attached great importance to humanitarian issues, such as humanitarian access to Syria. In the same vein, we will continue to help the Afghan people with humanitarian aid. Belgium will do its part, in line with our commitment announced last week in Geneva.

The world cannot turn its back on the Afghan people.

Yes, humanitarian assistance is necessary and needed to save lives. But only tents and food will not be enough. I see an important role for the United Nations

in remaining close to the people of Afghanistan. To provide humanitarian assistance. But even more to prevent the country from imploding.

Turning our back on the Afghan people, would come at a high cost. A population plunged into extreme poverty, will fall victim to extreme ideologies or will do everything to leave the country.

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Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

These three vulnerabilities, health, climate, and security, are a threat to human rights and their universality. For Belgium, peace, security and development are not possible without a profound respect for human rights.

In every crisis, in every war, women and girls suffer first and suffer most. We are concerned by the appointment of a Taliban government that does not reflect the political, religious and ethnic diversity of Afghanistan.

Afghan women and girls are already bearing the brunt. They are tear-gassed, beaten, dismissed, locked up at home. We will continue to monitor their rights. They must be able to go to school, to work, to live their lives in freedom.

Societies where women are respected and equally represented, where they thrive and can become teachers, society leaders and CEO's, are stronger and more stable societies.

Twenty years ago, Belgium played a crucial part in the adoption of the Durban Declaration and Program of Action. The fight against racism is of paramount importance to my government. Racism, antisemitism and all other forms of discrimination and intolerance, are unacceptable.

We need to challenge and end racial injustice. In doing so, we will shape a society that lives up to the promise of the fundamental equality of all human beings. The universality of human rights is the cornerstone of the modern international order. It is an essential obligation for all states.

That universality is all too often questioned. More than ever, we need to reaffirm that human rights are not a favour. They are an obligation. Everywhere. For everybody.

Too many women and girls still fall victim to human rights violations. Same-sex relationships are still considered a criminal offence in many countries. Belgium will continue to be a voice for LGBTI people.

We will not let our guard down.

For all these reasons, Belgium aspires to become a member of the Human Rights Council for 2023-2025.

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Mr. President,

These global vulnerabilities threaten the very fabric of our societies, our ways of life. They can only be addressed by a collective answer, based on a dynamic multilateralism.

“No one is safe until everyone is safe”. That has become our guiding principle in fighting the pandemic. It is the present-day translation of Hammarskjöld pointing out that the weakness of one is the weakness of all.

“No one is safe until everyone is safe”.

Let this be our common objective when it comes to climate, security and human rights as well.

Let that guideline inspire our actions every day.

Thank you.