

UNHCR Regional Representative's Statement

United Nations Association of Australia UN 60th Anniversary Conference

ANU, Canberra, 13 August 2005

I am grateful to the UN Association of Australia for organising this conference and for giving me the opportunity to provide one of two "UN perspectives on the future", based on my personal experiences and opinions, in the context of this conference on "The UN 60 Years On: What Can We Do Next?"

So, we have this watershed opportunity to reform the UN, but what do the people of the world, who are after all its constituency, want it to be in the future?

From the perspective of a UN staff member, as I read SG Annan's report "In Larger Freedom", it is not about re-writing the UN Charter, but about improving its structures, and enabling the UN to do better. It is seeking to build upon ongoing initiatives, such as the struggle against global terrorism; such as making more progress on achieving the objectives set in 2000 in the Millennium Development Goals – to reduce poverty, combat the spread of HIV and AIDS; such as improving protection of individual human rights; such as encouraging democratic governance; and such as addressing other challenges like environmental degradation and trafficking in human beings.

It reiterates one important fact: that no one State, no matter how powerful, can deal with these challenges alone. Like it or not, a supra-national organisation is needed. Not an organisation that dictates to States, but one that provides standard-setting and peer-review mechanisms to promote greater freedom for the world's people.

Few could have failed to recognise the growing threat that international terrorism poses to their security, but how can stronger approaches to dealing with it take place without restricting or abusing freedoms and rights?

Sovereign integrity and effective social welfare systems are all parts of your personal security as Australians. You are lucky to have Government authorities you can turn to when you need. The proponents of the Westphalia Treaty, of not intervening in the internal affairs of Sovereign States, in border controls, of the security which a world comprising just over 200 nation states offers, may sometimes forget that real security on the territory of one nation state is impossible without contributing to regional and international security systems.

But what if a State persecutes or abuses the rights of its own citizens? What if a Non-State actor persecutes them and is so powerful that the State is unable to prevent it? What do we do when genocide takes place on our television screens, as it did in Rwanda in 1994?

As a UNHCR staff member, I have to deal with those people who have fled such persecution - often by their own Government, and with stateless persons, who like refugees need other States to provide them with protection, with asylum, with a place of safety, with recognition of their identity and their worth, and with solutions that offer a return to normalcy.

From my humanitarian perspective, then, I see a need for strengthening the UN's human rights capacity. The annual sessions of the Commission do seek to name and shame those who abuse the basic rights of others, but many States fail to take corrective action as a result. While the SG's proposal to create a UN Human Rights Council is probably the least advanced of the proposals in his report, for me it is fundamental.

I also see a need to strengthen the international community's ability to "win the peace", and prevent return to conflict, thus I hope that the proposed UN Peacebuilding Commission will help to address this existing shortcoming.

Nine out of ten articles I read regarding UN reform are about the Security Council. Should it have 15, 20 or 24 members? With or without the veto? How can it be made more representative of today's world rather than the world as it was in 1945? Will a bigger Security Council be more or less likely to come to agreement on how best to deal with urgent international security threats? The degree of attention these matters are receiving is understandable, but in my view disproportionate.

Finally, for me, the devil is not so much in the detail as in the politics, and my number one priority would be that the diplomatic art of compromise must be strengthened if States are to make more effective, collective decisions and progress in the General Assembly and in the Economic and Social Council, and thus enable the UN members states to collectively act to reduce the root causes of suffering, and live up to the commitments they make to ensuring freedom flourishes.

Thank you for your attention.