

Remarks

*Kofi A. Annan**

Remarks by Kofi A. Annan at the conference of the Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, held at the Prado Museum (Madrid) on 16 June 2008 and organised by the Elcano Royal Institute, with the collaboration of the following Spanish institutions: CIDOB Foundation, FRIDE, ICEI and INCIPE.

Thank you for that welcome and for the invitation to say a few words in front of this distinguished audience.

I should start with belated congratulations to Prime Minister Zapatero and his Government for winning their second term earlier this year.

As someone who once served two terms myself, I know how important experience is in a tough job, but also know that there is no let up in the challenges you face.

So you have my congratulations and my sympathy.

It is a challenging time to be a leader of any country. Our world, more than ever before, needs sound judgement, vision and courage.

You are, however, leading a country which has shown itself a model of progress.

Spain has undergone a remarkable transformation in the recent decades.

The decisive role that the Spanish Crown played in transforming Spain from a dictatorship into a vibrant modern democracy is a turning point in the history of Spain.

The way you have embedded the fundamentals of a democratic system, decentralising power, extending rights, improving the position of women while building robust social protection for all has been an inspiration.

You have shown that change for good, even fundamental change, is possible.

And because of your history, language, culture and connections Spain is ideally placed to play an increasingly valuable role in this new century.

In fact, it is hard to think of a country better placed.

You are again firmly at the heart of Europe.

You are also at the cross-roads between this continent and Africa, providing as well a link between Islam and Christianity which runs deep through your history and culture.

* *Former UN Secretary-General.*

A common language, your shared roots and millions of personal links also means you are a vital bridge between the old world and the new.

It is a time of great opportunity for your country and also great responsibility – and one I know you are working hard to meet.

I have been asked to say a few words about the principles I believe should guide international affairs in the 21st century.

From what I have just said, it is clear you are doing pretty well without my advice.

Engagement, dialogue and co-operation are central to your country's outlook.

Whether through the European Union, the regional bodies to which you belong, or the United Nations itself, you are determined to work with partners and the international community as a whole.

This has to be the right approach for Spain and our world.

For the challenges we face are global.

And the only way we are successfully going to overcome them is by working together.

Our world is more inter-dependent than ever before.

We live in a time of immense opportunity.

We can count ourselves more fortunate, in many ways, than our parents or grandparents.

But at the same time, we inhabit a world where a problem in one country can spread like wildfire across the globe.

Where difficulties in one sector of the economy in one country can send shock waves through the global economy.

Where disease can be carried across oceans in a matter of hours, with international airlines carrying 850m passengers a year.

Where even the climate is changing in ways that will affect the lives of everyone on the planet.

And it is a world where extremism fostered thousands of miles away can lead to the cold-blooded mass murder of innocent commuters in Madrid.

Such acts of barbarity can never be defended or justified as we both recognized at the International Summit on Democracy, Terrorism and Security organised by the Club of Madrid in March 2005.

Against such threats as these, no single nation can make itself secure.

Nor can we hope to keep our citizens safe by hiding behind our national frontiers.

It is clear our own security and prosperity depends upon working to deliver security and prosperity for all.

We must look outwards.

We can't afford to turn a blind eye to what is happening beyond our borders or continent.

Our own security now demands more than for us to be ready to come to each other's aid if countries are attacked by their neighbours.

It means the international community must be prepared to protect populations attacked from within their own borders.

I was delighted that this responsibility to protect from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity was finally accepted by all nations at the 2005 UN summit.

National sovereignty can no longer be used as a shield by governments intent on massacring their own people.

Nor, of course, as an excuse for the rest of us to do nothing, when such appalling crimes take place before our eyes. Some crimes are so shameful that I believe we should all ask what we can do to help.

I believe, however, this responsibility to all the world's citizens must go beyond those living today to include future generations.

This requires us to strive to leave the world in the same state, if not better, than we inherited it.

There is an African proverb: The earth is not ours; it is a treasure we hold in trust for future generations.

This generation must show itself worthy of that trust.

And that means we must do more – and with absolute urgency – to combat climate change.

The evidence is now overwhelming that man's activities are behind the warming of our planet.

The result – droughts, coastal flooding, heat waves, loss of arable land, flooding – will affect us all as they lead to new conflict, border disputes and mass migration.

We are already seeing how climate change is hitting food supplies – shortages which, without action, risk undoing all the progress we have seen in Africa in recent years, and in other poor countries around the world.

Humanitarian challenges will rapidly become political and security risks.

Every day we fail to tackle climate change, increases these risks.

Every day we talk but do too little increases the threat to our children and our children's children.

No country will escape these costs and I know that here in Spain, it is a threat which seems very real.

But, of course, it will be the poorest countries and people – those who did least to cause the change in the climate – who will pay the highest price.

And I believe in this new global society, we are not just responsible for each other's security but also for our welfare.

Global solidarity is both necessary and possible.

It is necessary because without this solidarity, no society can be truly stable, and no one's prosperity truly secure.

This is true not just within national societies but also in our global market economy.

We can't continue with a situation where the benefits from globalization belong to only one part of humanity while billions of our fellow human beings are left, or even pushed, into abject poverty.

This was why the world came together to agree the Millennium Development Goals.

If delivered, they will lift millions out of poverty and provide access to clean water, to education and basic health care.

These are goals which Spain has supported both morally and with generous financial assistance.

I hope other countries will follow your lead.

For there is a great deal more to do if we are to reach these targets through increased aid and support from the wealthier countries.

Aid alone will not, however, be enough to begin to tackle the gross disparities of opportunity and wealth we see.

We must act with vision to remove unfair barriers to trade and finance and do so urgently.

We need to put broader national interests above those of powerful sectional lobbies.

If we have the courage to do so, we all gain as we will through tackling climate change.

For just as each of our security is linked more closely than ever to the security of all, so our stability and prosperity are linked to spreading prosperity to all.

A central pillar for a more stable and fairer world must be respect for human rights and the rule of law.

I know this will find a particular resonance given Spain's astonishing journey in recent decades.

Without the rule of law and protection of rights, society is denied its solid foundations and economic progress is that much more difficult.

And these fundamental rights and common values can also help unite our world by stressing our shared dignity and humanity.

They help us build nations and a world in which different communities can co-exist and enjoy equal rights and opportunities.

This is the spirit of the imaginative initiative of the Alliance of Civilisations that you, President Zapatero, launched, and which was co-sponsored by Prime Minister Erdoğan of Turkey.

This is why the United Nations is promoting the Alliance as a basis for mutual respect between societies, which is fundamental to bringing peoples together.

Human rights and the rule of law are not luxuries. They are fundamental to all our ambitions for our world.

There is, of course, no more fundamental human right than the right to life or protection against inhumane and degrading treatment.

That is why I welcome this country's efforts to mobilise international support to end the death penalty.

It is a fitting initiative to mark the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

And just as the rule of law is vital for the protection of individual citizens, so it is vital in the international arena.

This, of course, was why the United Nations was set up sixty years ago.

It should come as no surprise to this audience that I believe, in this inter-dependent world, that the United Nations is more important than ever.

In fact, it is only through multilateral institutions that states can hold each other to account, giving the poor and weak some influence over the actions of the rich and strong.

And that makes it very important to organize those institutions in a fair and democratic way.

That applies particularly to the international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Developing countries should have a stronger voice in these bodies, whose decisions can have almost a life-or-death impact on their fate.

And it also applies to the UN Security Council, whose membership still reflects the geopolitical reality of 1945, not 2008.

So reform of the Security Council is vital.

Reform to add new members on a permanent or semi-permanent basis to give greater representation to parts of the world whose voice is not properly heard today.

But also reform to ensure its members accept the special responsibility that comes with their privilege.

I have mentioned reform a number of times, which brings to mind an anecdote: As I took over as Secretary-General in 1997, I immediately initiated a reform process. At my second monthly lunch with the members of the Security Council, six weeks into my first mandate, the Ambassador of the Russian Federation, and now Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, chided me that he still had not seen any results of my reform efforts. He then added, even as the only communist in the room, that he recalled that “it only took God six days to complete His creation, so what are you waiting for”? To which I responded, “yes, that’s right, but God had an advantage I don’t have, He was working alone...” No Security Council, no General Assembly...

The Security Council must not be just another stage on which to act out national interests. Its members carry the responsibility.

It has to be the “executive committee”, if you will, of our fledgling collective security system.

So collective responsibility, global solidarity, the rule of law, mutual accountability, and multilateralism must, I believe, be at the heart of our approach in the 21st century.

It is the recognition that if some of us are poor, we are all poorer.

If some countries are unstable, we are all less secure.

It lays stress on the crucial importance of human rights and the rule of law.

It is the understanding that solutions to the world’s problems will only come if we work together – across borders, across boundaries of race, religion, language and culture.

These are beliefs I know this Government and country share.

I wish you good fortune as you continue to work to put them into practice.