

50th Session  
12th Plenary Meeting, 29th September, 1995

Speech by Mr. Pranab Mukherjee

Mr. President, It gives me great pleasure to congratulate you on your election as the President of this fiftieth session of the United Nations General Assembly, during which you will guide our discussions on what the future of the UN should be. May I also convey my thanks to your predecessor, H.E. Mr. Amara Essy, who as it were, tilled the ground which you will so.

A fiftieth anniversary is a climacteric, usually joyous but not necessarily so. In ancient India, this is around the time in a man's life that he would be expected to withdraw into a forest, to spend the rest of his days in contemplation of past and future, it being the assessment of our ancestors that anything a man could usefully do, he would have done by then. No such drastic measures are needed for the UN, not least because it has spent much of its first fifty years meditating in a concrete jungle, and the shadow of the woods of Bretton always loom over it. I do think however, that as we celebrate, which we should, the UN's survival, we should judge what it has done and what it now needs to do. The UN system has remarkable successes, in helping to defeat colonialism and apartheid, on social issues like universal health care and women's rights, and in banning, through global non-discriminatory treaties, two out of the three weapons of mass destruction. These are considerable achievements, but a clear pattern emerges from them; whenever the UN has acted on principle, responding to the felt needs and priorities of the majority of its membership, it has done well. When it has pursued narrow agendas or succumbed to special pleading it has not.

If we were setting out tasks for the UN today, what would be the major trends and challenges we would expect it to address? Firstly, the international economy transformed by global movements of trade, capital and labour, driven by forces which can break developing economies; these are regulated if they can at all be, in forums outside the UN, which is therefore marginalised in this most momentous

of contemporary developments. Secondly, an opening up of political systems, and democracy the norm of national governance; the UN welcomes this, urges the recalcitrant to change, but is itself sapped by undemocratic systems and institutions. Thirdly, the scourge of war increasingly replaced by the scourge of terrorism, which for the countries who sponsor it is war by other means; the UN, set up to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, ignores it as the League of Nations, to its fatal peril, ignored the threat of xenophobia.

These are complex and titanic forces. We, therefore, cannot accept, either as a statement of fact or as a basis of policy, the view that all this meant was that the days of absolute sovereignty were over. Sovereignty has never been absolute. Most members of the UN joined immediately after emerging from colonial rule, with their economies destroyed, and dependent on foreign languages for communication, on imperial capitals for support, on donors for subsistence; this is hardly the stuff on which absolute sovereignty is built. It was, in fact, one of the great virtues of the UN that it gave fledgling nations space to exercise the sovereignty so cruelly circumscribed elsewhere. Therefore, the UN should not claim a unilateral right to intervene in the affairs of its members; sovereignty can be dilated only with the voluntary consent of nation States, accepting obligations that are non-discriminatory, or in exceptional circumstances, where State authority has collapsed. Far from enfeebling sovereignty, it is the UN's task to nurture it in a world that has made the powerful even more dominant, and the weak increasingly powerless. We must never forget that this Assembly is one of our nations united. The United Nations rests on the commitment to it of sovereign nations.

There is clearly an enormous need for global action to deal with complex issues which have no territorial limits or borders; this is the task of the UN. Developing countries who represent the majority of the United Nations, obviously want it to focus on the issues of most pressing concern to them. That is not only fair, that would be the democratic thing to do. For us, the single most important task is development, and we expect this to be the highest priority on the international agenda, as it is on our domestic agendas. Sadly, it is not. The Agenda for Development looks lamentably like an appendix. Can

we, at this session, pledge ourselves to honour the commitments, freely negotiated but never implemented, which will make development possible in the South, and make the world, for all of us, a better and more peaceful place.

It is just as important for the UN to have a say in the decisions that guide the international economy; Chapter IX of the UN Charter gave it the task to promote higher standards of living, solutions of international economic, social, health and related problems, and universal respect for human right and fundamental freedoms. Like the UN, the World Trade Organisation gives equal weight to the votes of all its members, but it would be a pity if the WTO cut even the tenuous links between GATT and the UN, and instead, decided that global economic policies will be coordinated in the future between it, the World Bank and the IMF, where the system of weighted voting makes the voice of the developing countries irrelevant. At the same time, several studies commissioned to coincide with this anniversary claim UNCTAD no longer has a useful purpose. This can either mean that the problems UNCTAD addresses development strategies, poverty alleviation, resource transfers and debt, and the transfer of technology have been settled, or are now irrelevant. Neither is true. These continue to be burning issues for developing countries and if the UN chooses to ignore them, it will not serve the needs of its membership.

The UN must assume its Charter responsibility to supervise and coordinate global economic policies. In the WTO, efforts have been made to link trade to environment and labour standards. The World Bank, in its World Development Report 1995, warns about the "proliferation of protectionist demands, many of them under the guise of demand for fairtrade and a level playing field". If, indeed, there is a geminated interest in protecting the environment and the interest of labour in developing countries, why are UNEP and the ILC being sidelined in this exercise? The answer must be that there is no provision in these bodies for the coercive retaliatory action which would be available under the sanctions regime of the WTO.

However, the industrialised countries say that environmental and labour standards must be harmonised upwards because otherwise, transitional corporations would go where these standards were the lowest. This, of course, implies that TNCs have an appalling, and

exploitative, standard of behaviour, but when in the 70s and 80s, the UN tried to develop a Code of Conduct for TNCs, we were told that TNCs were models of virtue. How do these two views cohere?

Mr. President,

The magnitude of the problem posed by these global economic forces is enormous. Trade is the oxygen of our economies, but cross-border trade between transnational corporations constitutes one-third of world trade, and almost 15% of global GNP. No developing country, or group of developing countries, can match this commercial strength augmented of course, by the enormous weight of financial flows, which can make or break a country's financial structure.

The third element in the trinity of mobility in the international economy is migration. 125 million people presently live outside their countries, but more than half of them move between developing countries; this is not, therefore, as it has so often been misrepresented, only a problem for the developed world. It is disturbing, however, that those who insist on unfettered and truly global flows of capital and trade also insist on restrictions being placed on the movement of labour. Economic arguments are given to justify this, but there are also claims that "large migrations disturb the way a society thinks of itself as a unified cultural or ethnic energy".

It would be honest to recognise these fears as racist. India is a model of how these fears can be overcome. On the one hand, over the last decade, several million illegal immigrants have come into India. We know, to our cost, the political, economic and social strain this causes. However, we do not accept a racial basis for discriminating against legal migrants. We do not accept that nationhood is based on race any more than it is based on religion or any other exclusive attribute. The waves of migration that have washed over India have made us a multi-ethnic society; we have been culturally enriched, nor impoverished. We urge the international community not to let the forces of xenophobia rise again. Sovereignty has never been threatened by fresh blood fruely welcomed; it has by the forces of racist intolerance.

This brings me naturally to the other force that now threatens the sovereignty of so many nations. Terrorism is the black plague of our times, and it has been made more dangerous by the mystique with which the media has endowed it. It is argued sometimes that one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist; this is specious logic. In 1922 Mahatma Gandhi suspended for several years the freedom struggle in India because, in an incident in the village of Chauri Chaura, a mob burnt some policemen to death; in Gandhi's view, the view of the ultimate freedom-fighter, the means must sanctify the ends.

What ends could possibly justify the barbarism of taking an innocent foreigner in India hostage, and beheading him in cold blood? Foreign mercenaries did this to the Norwegian Hans Christian Ostro last month. An empire of terror is being built up with arms and money sent across borders, its foot soldiers are drawn from the bigoted, its leadership from ruthless, unprincipled men, and regrettably, some women.

At every summit in recent years, whether of the Non aligned, the G-7, the OSCE, or the Commonwealth, Heads of State and Government have reaffirmed their resolve to defeat all forms of terrorism. However, in the UN, where we are all represented, we have been unable to speak in such forth right terms. We must do so at this fiftieth anniversary. To appease terrorism now will be as dangerous as appeasing xenophobia was in the 1930s (or as it would be now), and ultimately as destructive of both peace and democracy because terrorism as I said earlier, is war by other means. Whether it tries to violate the territorial integrity of a country, as in India in our State of Jammu & Kashmir, or to unseat duly constituted governments as in Afghanistan the acts of States sponsoring terrorism are in fact, acts of war.

Democracies, as open societies, are particularly vulnerable to terrorism. The UN welcomes the global trends that has made democracy the norm of governance, but has done nothing to defend democracies from extremist and other threats. Instead, it comforts itself with the manures that democracy is development, and democracies do not wage war. These neatly package all the world's problems and absolve the UN of any further responsibility. Establish democracy everywhere, and automatically, development and peace will follow.

Both propositions are historically untrue. Democracies that developed in the 19th and 20th centuries either suppressed democratic rights until they became rich, or grew rich on the ruthless exploitation of colonies; when they shed their empires after the Second World War, democracy became development in Europe only in the uniquely generous embrace of the Marshall Plan. The myth that democracies do not wage war is destroyed by the history of colonial rule and its wars, leading up to the conflagration of the First World War. The UN should, therefore, take these propositions as objectives, not as givers. Democracy should lead to development, democracies should be peaceful.

I want to touch briefly upon two other global issues which affect our lives; disarmament and human rights. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Mahatma Gandhi said that the use of the atom bomb for the wholesale destruction of men, women and children was the most diabolical use of science. We were, therefore, appalled that, instead of stepping back from the road to nuclear ruin, the nuclear weapon states sped faster and faster down it. As they accelerated, India tried unsuccessfully to put on the brakes. In 1954, we called for an end to nuclear testing. In 1965, we proposed principles for an NPT. In 1982 we called for a Convention to ban the use of nuclear weapons, and for an end to the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons. In 1988, we proposed to the UN a comprehensive Action Plan for a world free of nuclear weapons.

Our goal, shared, I believe by most of us here, is a world from which nuclear weapons have been eliminated. The nuclear weapon States claim to share this goal, but their present objective is to retain nuclear weapons while making sure others do not get them. The logic of this is hard to understand. It cannot be argued that the security of a few countries depends on their having nuclear weapons, and that of the rest depends on their not. What makes the NPT such a pernicious document is that it legitimises this illogic, and now that it has been made permanent, it has made the possession of nuclear weapons by the nuclear weapon States immutable, and has made the goal of global nuclear disarmament that much more difficult.

It is useful to recall that, when India and other developing countries proposed the NPT, a global balance of responsibilities was envisaged.

Those who did not have nuclear weapons would not seek to acquire them; those who had them would not try to either refine or develop them, or to increase their arsenals. This balance was never honoured, with the result that, 25 years after the signature of the NPT, the world is a much more dangerous place, made so by the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the nuclear weapon States.

I recall this background, two years ago, the international community at last agreed to negotiate a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. We are glad that negotiations are in progress, but we also note that nuclear weapons States have agreed to a CTBT only after acquiring the know-how to develop and refine their arsenals without the need for tests. In our view, the CTBT must be an integral step in the process of nuclear disarmament. Developing new warheads or refining existing ones after a CTBT is in place, using innovative technologies, would be as contrary to the spirit of the CTBT as the NPT is to the spirit of non-proliferation. The CTBT must contain a binding commitment on the international community, especially the nuclear weapon States, to take further measures within an agreed time-frame towards the creation of a nuclear weapon free world.

The existence of nuclear weapons poses a threat to peace and security. Only global nuclear disarmament can guarantee that there will never be a nuclear war. Therefore, despite the unfortunate legitimisation of nuclear weapons through the indefinite extension of the NPT, India will continue to work with like-minded countries for the early elimination of all nuclear weapons. We hope this session will finalise dates for the 4th United Nations Special Session on Disarmament in 1997.

Mr. President,

Human rights have always been a preoccupation of the United Nations, but their protection and promotion in each country is the primary responsibility of the government. The universality and interdependence of all human rights are also beyond question. That is precisely why the United Nations system cannot promote and protect human rights by a unilateral prioritisation of individual freedoms or a proliferation of intrusive mechanism or by diverting funds from development activities to human rights activities. The priorities of nations will differ. The United Nations must balance the promotion of all human rights - civil,

cultural, economic, political and social preserve and propagate the values of every society, and promote tolerance for diversity and cross-cultural interaction. Politicising the human rights agenda and using it to target countries is undesirable.

The UN will become responsive to these global issues and effective and efficient only if it too becomes more democratic in its functioning. Developing countries find it hard to identify with the agendas and priorities of the UN; they feel that it now represents the privilege of a few rather than the interests of the many. If the majority of its members become disenchanted with it, what role can the UN effectively play? For the UN to be more effective, the General Assembly must be given new life and breathe that life into the other bodies of the system. The legitimacy and effectiveness of the Security Council must be enhanced. An expansion of both permanent and non-permanent members is a must if the council is to become a truly representative body, acting on behalf of the members of the United Nations, for the maintenance of peace and security.

The Non-aligned have put forward a comprehensive proposal for the reform and restructuring of the Security Council. India believes that, to truly reflect the expanded membership of the UN, developing countries must be included as permanent members. New permanent members should be chosen not arbitrarily, but on objective criteria. In the League of Nations too, it was argued that one country had a special right of entry into the Supreme Council. When this was forced through, one or two of the other aspirants left the League starting its decline. We should not repeat that tragedy. On objective criteria, some countries will clearly qualify for permanent membership. We believe India will be among them.

The UN in recent years has devoted itself almost exclusively to peace-keeping, which is important, but not the central issue of our times. It is judged, naturally, by its record in these operations. There have been successes and failures and both provide the reason and the need for introspection. India believes that UN peace-keeping operations must be based on the principles evolved over the last fifty years. Operations guided by these principles have usually done well; where these have been abandoned failure has been common. Over the last year, this truth has gained broad acceptance, and the Special Committee on PKOs is now trying to collate these principles it would be desirable



for this 50th Session to agree upon them India will contribute to this work.

India has consistently supported peace-keeping activities of the United Nations. Indian troops have participated in all major peace-keeping operations ranging from Congo to Cambodia, Somalia and Mozambique. We are currently participating in UN peace-keeping operations in Rwanda, Angola, Haiti, Liberia and Kuwait. We have also offered a brigade of troops to the United Nations Standby Arrangement. India will continue to contribute to United Nations efforts to maintain international peace and security.

If the UN is to become a leading player on the world scene, it must be given the means needed to do the job we entrust to it. Clearly, setting out on a second fifty years with a crippling financial crisis is not the best way to do this. In India we make considerable efforts to pay our contributions promptly and in full. We believe that all members must pay their assessed contributions in full and on time. Further those in arrears must announce a schedule for settlement. There can be no progress in the on-going efforts for financial reform unless this is done.

Mr. President,

This 50th General Assembly is a historic one. It is our responsibility to rejuvenate the United Nations, give it the tasks we want it to do, and the means to do them with. We set up the United Nations because we felt that all of us stood to gain from it; in the dark days of the Cold War, and in the friction between North and South, we seem to have lost this vision.

Since the inception of the United Nations, India has been committed to the principles and objectives of the charter. In the last five decades we have played an important role in shaping the UN's agenda, taking the lead on the issues of decolonisation, disarmament, human rights and environment and other crucial issues. On this historic occasion we pledge our continuing commitment to the United Nations efforts to chart a new course for the collective benefit of all humanity. As we attempt to do so I am reminded of Jawaharlal Nehru's speech to this very Assembly in November, 1948 in Paris. He said and I quote: "The

objectives are clear and our aim is clear; and yet in looking at that aim we lose ourselves often, if I may venture to say so, in smaller matters and forget the main objective that we are looking at. Sometimes it seem that the objective itself goes a little clouded."

We must ensure, Mr. President, that we set aside smaller matter, that we do not allow the objective to get clouded and that we move forward together in harmony and for the benefit of all peoples of the world.

Thank you, Mr. President.