



Statement to be delivered by H.E. Miroslav Lajčák
President of the 72nd Session of the UN General Assembly
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*Heads of State and Government, Distinguished Ministers, Excellencies,
Mr. Secretary-General, Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I am honored to welcome you all to New York for the General Debate of the 72nd Session of the General Assembly.

I wish, however, that I could deliver a speech today, which is different to the one I prepared.

I wish I could point to a long list of examples of mediation and early action successfully averting conflicts. I would prefer to talk only about people who move and migrate out of choice - not desperation. It would be great to congratulate you all for meeting your climate-related commitments, and for relegating extreme poverty to the history books.

I hope that someone will, eventually, be able to deliver such a speech from this marble podium. But it cannot be me today.

Instead, conflict persists as an ugly reality of our world. Civilians – not soldiers – are paying the highest price. Schools and hospitals – not military barracks – are the targets of attacks.

I must also talk today about over 65 million people leaving their homes because they are forced to do so - not because they want to. I have to use my speech today to address other major challenges, including persistent poverty, growing inequalities, indiscriminate terrorist attacks, and worsening effects of climate change.

These are global challenges - every country is coping with at least one. But they are also individual in nature, touching on the lives of each person.

That is not to say that there is nothing to celebrate today. We have made a collective promise to humanity by signing up to the sustainable development goals. We have rallied in support of peace agreements, such as that seen in Colombia. We have said "enough is enough" when it comes to climate change by signing the Paris Agreement.

But we are not here today to dwell on our past achievements. We are here to look ahead. We will hear visions, ideas and – yes – criticisms and concerns over the coming week. These will chart the course of the UN as it works to address the most urgent global challenges. I am confident that they will also travel home with you, and influence your work as the world's leaders.

I will now, myself, start the ball rolling by outlining my vision for the 72nd Session.

First, peace and prevention should be at the center of everything the UN does. Because, if you read the UN Charter, there are only 5 references to "war". The word "peace", however, appears 47 times...

Unfortunately we are spending too much time and money reacting to conflicts, and not enough on preventing them. We need to recalibrate our efforts around peace and prevention. That is the only way to ensure that the UN is doing the job for which it was created.

I want to be clear: placing peace and prevention first is not about requesting more capacity from the outside. The UN already has most of the tools it needs. What we are missing are the conditions in which they can be properly used.

And the Sustaining Peace resolutions should be at the top of our toolbox. They challenge us to strengthen our response to crises before they result in the outbreak or recurrence of conflict. They call for a renewed focus on prevention. For this vision to come to life, these resolutions must be implemented. I hope to contribute to this process during my Presidency.

Prevention must become a greater part of the General Assembly's work. This will be important in our ongoing review of UN peace operations, and our engagement with the UN's first office of counterterrorism.

Prevention must also be better integrated into our development and human rights work. When people can live decent lives - when rights are respected - when rule of law is present in everyday life - it is harder to turn societies to conflict.

Second, a stronger focus must be placed on people.

This is because the UN was not made for diplomats or dignitaries. It was made for people.

We know that many people have become disillusioned. Countless others around the world, however, have high hopes for us. They see the UN's blue flag as a first sign of safety and the beginning of change.

One of the biggest tests for us will be the process to adopt the first Global Compact for Migration. Let me be frank here. This will be a difficult process. The issue of migration is highly divisive. We all have a different opinion on it. But we cannot turn this into an exercise of bureaucracy. We cannot be left with an agreement that works only on paper.

Another major challenge that demands a focus on people is international terrorism. This is not a problem that can be solved with guns, or shut out by barriers. People are at its center. They are the ones contributing to it. They are the ones suffering because of it.

The only way to succeed in both areas will be through choosing to focus on people, rather than rigidly sticking to our individual positions. We need viable global frameworks, which can be implemented by people - and for people - in real time.

But I want to stress one thing: we cannot fail. If we do, how can we claim that the UN is the best forum in which to address global challenges? Those who are cynical about the UN will be proven right. Others will find it hard to hold on to their hope.

A focus on people must also be more strongly felt in the humanitarian field. UN access and help to those in dire need cannot be compromised by any party. Violations of International Humanitarian Law are too common, and accountability for these crimes is too rare.

Finally, we must keep the promises we have made to advance prosperity and protect the planet.

Through the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Climate Agreement we made a clear commitment. We promised to improve the lives of all people, and secure the future of the planet we live on. However, we will not be able to achieve this without securing enough finances. We cannot sit and wait patiently for trillions of dollars to materialize. We must go out and search for them. This will involve more engagement with the private sector and financial institutions.

I see the priority clusters of 1) peace and prevention, 2) people, and 3) planet and prosperity as three sides of a triangle. They might not all be the same length, or the same width, but one is as important as the other.

I am confident that this triangle will point in the direction of promising prospects for our world.

Excellencies,

Let us not forget other, important issues that need to be mainstreamed.

Human rights are crucial. Neither peace nor development can take hold without them.

We must remember that we have a lot of work to do when it comes to gender equality. Women's leadership and participation should be a priority in settings of both conflict and peace.

UN Reforms will also be a main priority. There must be open and inclusive dialogue among Member States regarding the Secretary-General's reform proposals. I will work to facilitate this. I will also

personally engage closely with Member States to strengthen the role of the General Assembly. And I will promote a credible process to address the reform of the Security Council.

Finally, the UN should be opening its doors wider. We must strengthen our engagement with a wide variety of stakeholders, including regional and sub-regional organizations, civil society and the private sector. We need to hear more young voices in this Hall.

Excellencies,

Before I conclude, allow me to make a more personal observation.

I want to say that we cannot call for an end to business as usual - and then continue to do business as usual. If we are looking for a change in how the UN operates around the world, we should start here in New York. This can mean institutional change. But it can also mean a change in the way we work on a daily basis.

We can engage in real dialogue – not a succession of monologues. We can concentrate on how much – and not how little – we can give up in the spirit of compromise. We can look beyond our individual agendas and positions, and see the bigger picture of why the UN is here, and what it is trying to do.

I may not have been able to deliver a happy statement today, praising us all for making the world a better place to live in. But I will work throughout this year to increase the chances that, someday, one of my successors will have this great privilege.

I wish you success in your deliberations, which I am confident will be in the interest and to the benefit of all people.

Thank you!