

STRENGTHENING THE UNITED NATIONS

Statement by The Elders, 7 February 2015

The United Nations was founded in 1945 “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”.

Yet 70 years later far too many people in this world – in Nigeria, in Pakistan, in the Middle East, to name but a few places – are beginning the year 2015 in grief and suffering, caused by conflict and deliberate violence. Seventeen murders in Paris may seem little by comparison, but they too have horrified us all, because they were so clearly targeted at freedom of expression, and at the Jewish community. Millions of Muslims around the world sincerely deplore these murders, yet are also shocked to see their faith repeatedly caricatured.

Meanwhile the older threat of confrontation between great powers is also stirring again, notably in East Asia, and in Eastern Europe.

In short, human beings are far from being safe from the scourge of war, despite the UN’s best efforts.

Yet the world’s peoples yearn for a fairer, more peaceful world, where new generations can grow up in confidence. They do not want to see the UN wither into irrelevance, as the League of Nations did in the 1930s.

What needs to change?

All institutions must adapt to cope with new circumstances – and today’s circumstances are very different from those of 1945.

There have been profound shifts of power and wealth in the world since then. Of the 193 member states of the United Nations today, nearly three quarters were not members in 1945 – in a few cases because they had been on the wrong side in the second world war, but in the great majority of cases because at that time they did not yet exist as independent states.

Yet the Security Council, which has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, acting on behalf of all the member states, is still dominated by the same five permanent members that were designated all those years ago, being the five great powers that had just won the war.

The governments of those five powers have become so used to their exalted status, which is protected by their ability to veto any change in the Charter, that they think of it almost as their

natural right, sometimes forgetting that it is above all a responsibility. They assume that the world will continue to respect their authority, and fail to notice that, year by year, that authority is eroding.

The peoples of the global South, especially, do not see themselves adequately represented in the Council. They are therefore more and more inclined to question its authority, and the legitimacy of its decisions. We ignore this threat at our peril.

Recalling the wise guidance of our founder, Nelson Mandela, we, The Elders, call on governments to listen to their peoples, and on peoples to insist that their governments make more farsighted decisions.

We call on both the existing permanent members of the Security Council and the rest of the membership of the Organization to accept the urgency of strengthening the United Nations, and therefore accept also the compromises – sometimes painful ones – that will be needed to make it possible.

Our proposals

1. A New Category of Members

In principle, the existing permanent members claim to be ready to welcome new ones. But their sincerity has not been tested because the rest of the membership cannot agree on essential points: which countries, and how many, should be new permanent members, and should they, like the existing ones, be given a veto over the Council's substantive divisions? In the view of many, the use or abuse of the veto is responsible for some of the Council's most conspicuous failures, when it does not intervene in time, or with sufficient force, to protect the victims of genocide and other comparable crimes. Those states are understandably reluctant to give yet more powers the right of veto.

We therefore propose a compromise. **Let the states which aspire to permanent membership accept instead, at least for the time being, election to a new category of membership, which would give them a much longer term than the two years served by the non-permanent members, and to which they could be immediately re-elected when that term expires.** This would enable them to become *de facto* permanent members, but in a more democratic way, since it would depend on them continuing to enjoy the confidence of other member states. By making the Council more democratic, this change would increase its legitimacy in the eyes of the world, thereby enhancing its authority and so also making it more effective.

This compromise will not be easy for states which aspire to full permanent membership to accept. But we urge them, for the greater good, to set aside for now their larger ambition. If they do, we believe that other member states will be willing to accord them this special status, whereas their chances of achieving full permanent membership in the near or even medium term still seem remote. Half a loaf (and we submit that in its practical effects it would be much more than half) is proverbially better than no bread. And “no bread” in this instance means continuing the present stalemate, at an unacceptable cost to humanity and to innocent human lives.

Even so, such a change requires amendment of the Charter, which requires a two-thirds majority in the General Assembly and then ratification by two thirds of all UN members, including all five permanent members of the Security Council. This can be done. (The Charter has been amended three times – in the 1960s and early 70s – to enlarge the Security Council from 11 to 15 members, to make related changes to its voting arrangements, and to enlarge the Economic and Social Council.) But it will inevitably take some time: all the more reason for starting the process without further delay. Meanwhile, we propose three other changes, which do not require Charter amendment. We believe all three are urgently needed, to make the UN more effective, more authoritative and more efficient in its work of maintaining the peace. They should not wait until this first one has been completed.

2. A Pledge by the Existing Permanent Members

As already noted, on too many issues the Security Council is deadlocked by the failure of its permanent members to agree on a course of action, with the result that millions of people are left to suffer while great powers score debating points off each other. As the UN's founders understood, without the united support of the permanent members, both material and moral, the Council cannot act.

None of us has forgotten the Holocaust, Rwanda, Srebrenica, Saddam Hussein's campaign against Iraq's Kurds, or the killing fields of Cambodia. No part of the world has been spared these horrors. So the political will must be summoned to prevent, or at least limit, their repetition.

We therefore call on the five existing permanent members to pledge themselves to greater and more persistent efforts to find common ground, especially in crises where populations are being subjected to, or threatened with, genocide or other mass atrocities.

States making this pledge will undertake not to use, or threaten to use, their veto in such crises without explaining, clearly and in public, what alternative course of action they propose, as a credible and efficient way to protect the populations in question. This explanation must refer to international peace and security, and not to the national interest of the state casting the veto, since any state casting a veto simply to protect its national interests is abusing the privilege of permanent membership.

And when one or more permanent members do feel obliged to cast a veto, and do provide such an explanation, the others must undertake not to abandon the search for common ground but to make even greater efforts to agree on an effective course of action.

3. A Voice for Those Affected

When they can agree, the permanent members too often deliberate behind closed doors, without listening to the voices of those most directly affected by their decisions, and present their elected colleagues with ready-made resolutions leaving little room for debate. To remedy this, we call on all members of the Security Council to make more regular and systematic use of the "Arria formula" (under which, in the last two decades, Security Council members have had

meetings with a wide variety of civil society organizations), to give groups representing people in zones of conflict the greatest possible opportunity to inform and influence Council decisions.

At present, meetings under the Arria formula are too often attended only by junior officials, whose reports can easily be ignored. In future, we call on the heads of the delegations of all countries serving on the Security Council, including the permanent members, to attend all meetings held under this formula in person. **Members of the Council must use such meetings to ensure that their decisions are informed by full and clear knowledge of the conditions in the country or region concerned, and of the views of those most directly affected.**

4. A New Process for Choosing the Secretary-General

At the United Nations, it is the Secretary-General who has to uphold the interests and aspirations of *all* the world's peoples. This role requires leadership of the highest calibre. Yet for 70 years the holder of this post has effectively been chosen by the five permanent members of the Security Council, who negotiate among themselves in almost total secrecy. The rest of the world is told little about the process by which candidates are identified, let alone the criteria by which they are judged. This barely follows the letter, and certainly not the spirit, of the UN Charter, which says the Secretary-General should be appointed by the General Assembly, and only on the *recommendation* of the Security Council.

To remedy this, we call on the General Assembly to insist that the Security Council recommend more than one candidate for appointment as the Secretary-General of the United Nations, after a timely, equitable and transparent search for the best qualified candidates, irrespective of gender or regional origin.

We suggest that the next Secretary-General be appointed for a single, non-renewable term of seven years, in order to strengthen his or her independence and avoid the perception that he or she is guided by electoral concerns. She or he must not be under pressure, either before or after being appointed, to give posts in the Secretariat to people of any particular nationality in return for political support, since this is clearly contrary to the spirit of the Charter. **This new process should be adopted without delay, so that the United Nations can make full use of it to choose the best person to assume the post in January 2017.**

No time to lose

The Elders believe that, for the UN to recover its authority and effectiveness in maintaining world peace and security, these changes are an essential starting point. We also believe that they are achievable, with a minimum of good will and effort on the part of member states. We therefore call on the citizens of all states to press their governments to take the necessary action. We, for our part, will do all we can to persuade them.

Discussions on these priority changes must start immediately, inside and outside governments. There is no time to lose.

Already there is a groundswell of pressure for change. By the time we mark the UN's 70th anniversary later this year, we hope to see this groundswell build into an unstoppable wave, drawing strength from all around the world.