

Address to the Nobel Peace Prize Centennial Symposium

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December 6, 2001

It is an honour to address this symposium. This gathering of Nobel Peace Prize Laureates has an important role to play in defining a way forward for humanity.

UNHCR has received the Nobel Peace Prize twice. First, in 1954, for its work in finding solutions for refugees who were still homeless in the aftermath of the Second World War; and then in 1981, for its role in managing the Vietnamese refugee crisis.

In the more than five decades of UNHCR's existence, the refugee problem has not gone away. On the contrary, refugees remain a potent symbol of the world's failure to put an end to war and persecution.

In its 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN General Assembly affirmed that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. The Declaration proclaims that no one should be held in slavery or subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. All are held to be entitled to equal protection of the law, to move about freely, to found a family, to own a property, to express their views, and to practice their chosen religion. All are held to be entitled to an adequate standard of living, employment, education, and health care.

In the years since 1948, governments have adopted many instruments to attain these fundamental human rights. Despite this, gross violations of human rights continue to be perpetrated in numerous countries. War, genocide, persecution, political repression, “ethnic cleansing”, terrorism and abject poverty continue to deprive individuals of their homes, their families, their work, their schools, their places of worship, and their access to education and health care. Millions of people are deprived of their liberty, security and dignity.

As High Commissioner for Refugees, today there are some 22 million people of concern to me. This includes refugees, internally displaced persons and stateless people. These are all people who do not benefit from the protection of their own government. For more than fifty years, my Office has worked to protect and assist such people – the dispossessed of the Earth. It is a lonely battle, and the numbers are not becoming smaller. Like so many others who are battling to reduce poverty, to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic, to preserve the environment, to ensure respect for Nature, to put an end to violence and conflict, and to build more democratic and inclusive societies, I am constantly reminded of how powerless we are.

I am concerned that globalization has been an unguided, leaderless phenomenon that has left millions of people with no immediate apparent benefits. Yes, it has increased global wealth, but it has also diminished the value of traditional cultures and ways of life, it has

opened up old wounds, and it has created a new set of injustices that breed violence as well as political and religious extremism. I am an economist, but I am convinced that we cannot go on with the pure economization of life, where everything is measured in terms of money and the capacity to generate wealth. I am convinced that humanity needs a common agreed ethical framework.

An integrated vision of the different challenges that we face would help to guide us towards a better future. Environmental challenges form an indivisible and inseparable relationship with human rights, social justice, democracy and peace. The failure to recognize the links between each of these has weakened our response. Today's institutions of global governance deal with each of these issues separately. One of our biggest challenges now is to come to a better understanding of the inter-relationship of the various components needed to ensure a more just and peaceful world.

Separate and fragmented efforts will not take us forward but will leave us directionless. I believe we need an ethical framework that links the arts, sciences, religions, educational institutions, the media, businesses, non-governmental organizations, multilateral organizations and governments in the search for a common destiny. This will require individual resolve and a consciousness of our belonging to one single human family. It will also require a willingness to implement the necessary institutional changes.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted more than fifty years ago as a basic condition for democratic societies, democratic nations, and united nations. This was a significant step forward for humanity. It then took decades to overcome colonialism, and we had to go through the long years of the Cold War until the world arrived at a general acceptance of the need for open, non-totalitarian societies. But in spite of all this progress, in places where people are poor and national economies are weak, the environment continues to suffer; and where the environment is abused and resources are over-consumed, people suffer and economies decline.

To break this vicious circle, we must support the extended agenda of the Earth Summit and its plan for worldwide action on the environment and poverty. We must go beyond ensuring respect for human rights, by also ensuring good business ethics and by promoting responsible business. We must also help to guide and empower civil society to bring about change. Governments have shown themselves to be unable to resolve problems on their own. Civil society must speak up for its beliefs and be part of creative solutions. Business must no longer insulate itself as outside the scope of values of human conduct. In this globalized world, where more and more voices are being heard, and where business and governance are becoming more global, a common ethical framework should ensure cohesion between governments, civil society and business.

Here lies the relevance of the Earth Charter, a declaration that had its origins in the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and that was finally approved by the Earth Charter Commission in Paris in March 2000. I have been involved with the Earth Charter since my time as Prime Minister of the Netherlands. The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century. It seeks to

inspire in all peoples a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well being of the human family and the larger living world. It promotes a culture of tolerance and non-violence, and recognizes that environmental protection, human rights, equitable human development and peace are interdependent and indivisible.

In particular, the Earth Charter recognizes that there can be no peace without social and economic justice and the eradication of poverty. It also recognizes that any efforts to achieve these goals are doomed to fail if there is no common ethical framework which is shared by governments, business, civil society, and all walks of life. Ethics and values can transpire into constitutions and codes of law. This occurs once beliefs and values coalesce into community norms. Ethics are the carrying framework of society, for a community without ethics cannot sustain itself.

Governments across the world have recently committed themselves to ridding this world of the scourge of terrorism. But we also have a collective responsibility to address the conditions that breed such hatred and violence in the first place. Injustice, poverty, conflict, ignorance and disease – all these contribute to general instability in the world. In a globalized world, we cannot afford to turn our backs on people and places severely affected by any of these maladies. And without a common ethical framework, efforts to address these issues will be in vain.

The Earth Charter offers a way forward by adopting this integrated approach. It links the various stakeholders who have an impact on our future. It is fundamentally about universal responsibility and interdependence.

Our global interdependence is ecological, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual. Not one of the major challenges that we face today – whether they relate to environmental protection, economic prosperity, the control of infectious diseases, crime, drugs, or terrorism – can be managed effectively by a community or country acting entirely on its own. The symbiosis of politics, business, civil society, arts and sciences will only offer a real way forward when values are shared and when interdependence is understood as the vital corollary of independence.

We must not become refugees from our home, the Earth. Our greatest task in this new century is to ensure that this never happens. The Earth Charter, a document which was ten years in the making, drafted through consultations held around the world, can inspire and guide us. I would therefore like to ask this group of peacemakers to endorse it and actively promote it. This would send a powerful message.

After the Declaration of Human Rights two generations ago, I believe that the time is ripe for the Earth Charter, which gives new hope and inspiration to people across the globe. We as a group could recommend that it be endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2002, the tenth anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit. Gathered together here in Oslo as Nobel Peace Prize Laureates celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Nobel Peace Prize, I believe that this is the best we can offer as a way forward for humanity.

Ahead of next September's World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, ten years after the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Kofi Annan has stated the following in a letter entitled Taking Action for Earth's Future:

“We live on one planet, connected in a delicate, intricate web of ecological, social, economic and cultural relationships that shape our lives. If we are to achieve sustainable development, we will need to display greater responsibility – for the ecosystems on which all life depends, for each other as a single human community, and for the generations that will follow our own, living tomorrow with the consequences of the decisions we make today.”

He sums up with a call “to put in place a new ethic of global conservation and stewardship”. Recognizing and endorsing the Earth Charter would be a major step forward in achieving this goal.

Thank you.