

UNITED NATIONS INFORMATION SERVICE VIENNA (UNIS)

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UNIS/SGSM/319
16 February 2012

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon:

Remarks to Vienna Community: “Empowering People in a Changing World”

Vienna, 16 February 2012

Your Excellency President Heinz Fischer,
Excellencies,
Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to be amongst such an influential and informed audience today.

Vielen Dank für diese Ehre. Es ist wunderbar, wieder in Wien zu sein.

There are many words to describe this very beautiful city of Vienna – historic ... glorious ...dazzling, dynamic.

All fit – especially here in the magnificent Hofburg Palace.

But the first word that comes to mind when I think of Vienna is “home”. My home, and home of the United Nations.

Ich bin in Wien zu hause.

I am at home here for many good reasons.

Personally, because I spent a couple of unforgettable years in Vienna as an ambassador. It is good to see so many familiar faces and old friends here today.

And professionally, because Vienna is a pillar of the United Nations – and an epicentre for global action.

You are one of four UN headquarters worldwide. Excluding UN headquarters in New York you are one of three largest UN presences and headquarters worldwide. You host the International Atomic Energy Agency ... the UN Office on Drugs and Crime the UN Industrial Development Organization ... and the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty Organization where I served as Chairman a long time ago.

But perhaps most of all, I am at home in Vienna because of your commitment to multilateralism ... your ethic of engagement.

So it is fitting that we gather here today to talk about empowering people in our changing world.

The national leaders here are working hard to empower your people. But as Secretary-General of the United Nations, I am working to empower all the people around the world. We have 7 billion people. There are billions of people underprivileged, marginalized, jobless, hopeless, frustrated people. To empower all these people, particularly women and children and youth -- this is a top priority and concern for the United Nations.

The time is right for us to discuss this matter.

This is a period of global transition.

Economic shocks around the world. Shifts in power and new poles of global growth. The rising threat of climate change. And, of course, a revolution of people-powered change.

Think back at the events and images of the past year.

The dramatic transformation which we have observed and witnessed in the Arab world and North Africa.

Tahrir Square and the fight for democracy throughout the Arab world.

Occupy Wall Street ... los indignados in Puerta del Sol ... protests in Greece.

What was the common thread? Look at the faces in the crowd.

They were overwhelmingly women and young people.

Women demanding equal opportunity and participation – decision-making participation

Young people worried about their future ... fed up with corruption ... and speaking out for dignity and decent jobs.

Their power and activism turned the tide of history.

Throughout these events, we called on leaders to listen to their people. Listen very carefully what their aspirations, what their challenges are.

Some heard – and benefitted. Some never did. Still we are seeing this kind of situation in Syria. And maybe somewhere else.

From the very beginning, I talked with President Assad by telephone and urged him to change before it was too late. Take a bold and decisive moment before it is too late. Instead, he declared war on his own people.

Lack of access has prevented the United Nations, the international community and humanitarian workers from knowing the full toll, yet credible reports indicate at least more than 5,400 people were killed as of last year. We have not been able to have credible information how many more people have been killed between 1 January and today.

Every day those numbers rise. We see neighbourhoods shelled by tanks. Hospitals used as torture centres. Children as young as ten years old jailed and abused.

We see almost certain crimes against humanity.

We cannot predict the future in Syria. We do know this, however: the longer we debate, the more people will die.

I commend the efforts of the League of Arab States to find a political solution. During recent days, I have been meeting and speaking with many world leaders, among them today I will meet with the Russian and French Foreign Ministers, and of course the Austrian Foreign Minister and others.

Once again, I urge the international community to speak in one voice in a coherent way: Stop the violence. Stop the bloodshed.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There's a broader lesson here, beyond Syria. This is very serious, but we have to look at the broader perspective.

I believe that every institution and every leader ... everywhere ... must ask that same question:

Are we listening? Are we doing enough ... fast enough?

I am convinced that we must act now.

We face a once-in-a-generation opportunity to empower people in our changing world.

Last month, I briefed the General Assembly on a five-action agenda for the future. I outlined five imperatives

for the next five years as Secretary-General.

Sustainable development is at the top of the list. This is critical to empowering people – to eradicating poverty, lifting billions of people from poverty, generating decent jobs, expanding education, and protecting our fragile planet from this ever-warming temperature.

Today, I want to focus on providing women and young people with a greater say in their own destiny and a greater stake in their own dignity.

This is fundamental to our entire agenda – crucial to everything we do.

I want to talk about this with you – an esteemed audience in all seasons of life.

All of us – women and men ... the young and what I might call the “formerly young” ... — have a profound interest in getting this right.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Half the world is women – and half the world is under 25 years of age.

One out of five people are between the ages of 15 and 24.

Nearly 90 per cent of them -- youth -- live in developing countries – nearly one billion live in Asia and Africa.

In places like Gaza, three out of four people are under the age of 25. In Iraq, one-quarter of the population was born since the start of the war in 2003 alone.

Some demographers call this a “youth bulge”.

I am not a big fan of that term.

I do not see the largest-ever generation of young people as a “bulge.” It is a dividend.

It is not a threat; it is an opportunity.

To seize it, we must face a new generation of empowerment challenges.

Let's start with empowering women.

Around the world, women educate the children ... they are the key to healthy families ... they are increasingly the entrepreneurs.

Wherever I travel, I urge leaders to put more women in genuine decision making roles.

More women in the Cabinet. More women in legislatures. More women leading universities. More women on corporate boards.

I am very happy to see Dr. [Barbara] Prammer here, as President of the National Council [Austrian Parliament's lower house].

There are very few women speakers, and women leaders. I am counting, how many women Ambassadors there are to the United Nations, how many women Heads of State or Heads of Government there are in the world, how many Foreign Ministers are Women. They are 15 to 25 per cent at most.

There are nine countries in the world where not a single woman is sitting in the national assembly. I am challenging these nine country leaders, and I think some of them have come up with action plans, quota systems or special measures.

I think that we are making progress.

Studies have found that Fortune 500 companies with the highest number of women on the governing boards were far more profitable than those with the fewest number.

Today, many look to the world of social media. The majority of those who use it are women – and the Chief

Operating Officer of Facebook is a woman.

Yet many are asking: Why are there no women on the corporate board of Facebook, Twitter or other young, dynamic companies?

I believe that's a fair question.

In my visits around the globe, I always make the case for greater women's representation in Parliaments – including in the Arab world. Some suggest quotas or other action agendas.

Then they ask me, why are you focusing on women in national assemblies? We have women Cabinet ministers, women Ambassadors. They are important. But they are appointed. We want women who can really represent the voice of the people, who are elected by the people. The more women we have in the national assemblies, the more women we have in decision-making positions, the better.

There is plenty of evidence that shows how such temporary measures can make a permanent difference.

We must not miss this opportunity to write women's rights more deeply into the constitutional and legal framework in the Arab region and beyond.

We are also putting women at the core of our efforts to strengthen equality and growth while protecting our planet. Women hold the key to sustainable development.

You will hear more about this as we approach the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development.

I am committed to doing much more.

This morning I emphasized the importance of the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development to President Fischer. I am asking all world leaders to be present at the highest level.

This includes deepening our work to combat violence against women – and expanding women's participation in peacebuilding efforts.

And within the United Nations, I will keep leading by example.

I have often been confronted with the question how many senior women we have in the United Nations.

In my first five years as Secretary-General, I have nearly doubled the number of women in senior UN positions, at the rank of Assistant Secretary-General and Under-Secretary-General.

Our top humanitarian official, high commissioner for human rights, our top development official...our head of management ... our top doctor ... top lawyer ... even our top cop... all are women.

You see a lot of women in the United Nations. This is what I have changed in my first five years. You need to have political will.

And we have the largest number of women in UN history – five and counting – leading UN peacekeeping missions and managing thousands of soldiers in the field. From Timor-Leste to South Sudan. From Central Africa to Cyprus to Burundi.

When I became Secretary-General, I realized that before I came, during the past 62 years, there had been only two women heads of mission. In five years, I have appointed five more, and nine more [deputy heads] are waiting in line.

And at New York headquarters, we have the new UN Women – as you know very well, this is headed by the former President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet.

I am also keenly aware that we have much more to do to empower women within the United Nations. And I am determined to keep building on our record.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We should focus more, as we have been doing on women, on youth, young people.

Window dressing will not do it. Neither will politically expedient band-aids.

Let me tell you what I mean.

Not long ago, a Head of State called on the United Nations to establish an International Year on Youth.

He claimed he wanted young people to make their voices heard.

The bad news is that the leader was President Ben Ali of Tunisia.

The good news is it worked!

A few months into the International Year of Youth, he heard the voice of his country's young people – started by Mohamed Bouazizi, a young, jobless, frustrated and troubled young person, who started the of these burning aspirations of young people.

What happened to President Ben Ali? He was forced to leave office because he listened too late.

But, once again, we are reminded that we all have an obligation to listen.

That is what I do.

I try to meet with young people wherever I go.

Those exchanges are some of the toughest, most candid, spirited discussions that I have.

Young people everywhere talk jobs. They want the dignity that comes from decent work. Economic hard times and austerity measures are making it more difficult.

The global economic crisis is a global jobs crisis. And youth are hardest hit.

Unemployment rates for young people are at record levels – two, three, sometimes even six times the rate for adults.

But joblessness is only part of the story. Many who are working are stuck in low-wage, dead-end work.

Many others are finding that their degrees are not always a ticket to jobs.

After years of study, they learn a new lesson: their schooling has not equipped them with the tools for today's job market.

This must change.

Young people also tell me that they not only want jobs – but the opportunity to create jobs. So we must do more on entrepreneurship.

Austria has much to teach us. You are tackling youth unemployment – just as you are working to address the new requirements of an aging workforce.

I am told by President Fischer that Austria has the lowest rate of unemployment [in Europe]. I congratulate you for that.

The Austrian apprenticeship model is the kind of initiative that young people say they would like to see in their own countries.

Now is the time to step up our efforts.

Last year, as you know very well, the world's population crossed 7 billion. In five years, it will be 7.5 billion.

The world will need 600 million new jobs over the next decade.

Without urgent measures to stem the rising tide of youth unemployment, we risk creating a "lost generation" of wasted opportunities and squandered potential.

That is why I pledge that the United Nations will go deeper in identifying the best practices and helping countries deliver on education, skills, training, and job-rich growth for young people.

Still, there are almost 70 million people, 67 million young people, who are out of school, even primary education. That is the second pillar of the Millennium Development Goals, providing primary education to all children.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Economic empowerment and political empowerment go hand-in-hand.

Technology, education and awareness are combining to give young people a voice like never before. And they are using it.

They are standing up for rights and against discrimination based on gender, race and sexual orientation.

They are leading the way for sustainable solutions and green development.

They are putting inequality on the global agenda.

Our job is to help them build the future they want.

Above all, young people have told me they want a seat at the table. They want a real voice in shaping the policies that shape their future.

The priorities of young people should be just as prominent in our halls as they are on the streets and squares. They should be just as present in our meeting space as they are in cyberspace.

I am determined to bring the United Nations closer to people and make it more relevant to young people. They are still marginalized and underprivileged.

That is one reason we will expand the UN Volunteer Programme. Today, the average age of UN Volunteers is 37 – we will open the doors for young people and are looking for support.

But that is just the beginning.

We must put a special focus where the challenges of empowering women and empowering youth come together – and that is in the lives of young women.

Young women are potential engines of economic advancement. They are drivers of democratic reform.

Yet far too often – a combination of obstacles including discrimination, social pressure, early marriage – hold them back.

These forces set in motion a chain of unequal opportunities that last a lifetime.

Young women must have the tools to participate fully in economic life and to have their voices heard in decision-making at all levels.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have been working to address all these areas at the United Nations.

But I am not satisfied.

Too often our work has been piecemeal, scattered. The whole is not greater than the sum of the parts. There is a coordination gap. It must be bridged.

That is why I will appoint the first-ever United Nations Special Adviser on Youth.

We need a top-to-bottom review so our programmes and policies are working with and for young people.

We need to mobilize coalitions for action.

We need to pull the system together so that is pulling for youth.

I will ask my Special Adviser to do just that.

We have a choice.

Young people can be embraced as partners in shaping their societies, or they can be excluded and left to simmer in frustration and despair.

Let us recognize that addressing the needs and hopes of the world's women and young people is not simply an act of solidarity, it is an act of necessity.

We don't have a moment to lose. We have the world to gain.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Here in this beautiful palace, in the Redoutensäle, there is a painting. It covers the length of the entire ceiling - 400 square metres.

And in it, the artist included the words of the esteemed Viennese poet, Karl Kraus, and his work "Jugend" – "Youth".

An older man reflects on life and the rejuvenating spirit of youth.

"Da schon die Blätter falb,
will ich nicht säumen,
innen und außerhalb
Frühling zu träumen."

"Even as the leaves change, I do not want to miss, inside and outside, dreaming of spring."

We all hold on to our youth. We remember with both sadness and sweetness the moment when the doors of the future opened before us.

This is what carries us. This is what rejuvenates us. Let us pass that dream to all the world's youth and women.

Let us hear their voices and let us act in the spirit of spring.

We will do much more than empower people. We will empower societies. And we will change our world for good.

Let us shape the future we want, let us work together to make this world better for all.

Thank you.

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