

UNITED NATIONS



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**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**

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**SPEECH AT UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON SPECIAL CONVOCATION TO  
CONFER HONORARY DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF LAWS**

**“Rights, responsibilities and renewed multilateralism”**

**Seattle, 26 October 2009**

Dr. Mark Emmert, [President of the University of Washington]  
Hon. Mr. Gates Senior,  
Hon. Governor of the State of Washington, Chris Gregoire,  
Distinguished faculty members, staff and dear students,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

A great Seattle philosopher once said: “Knowledge speaks, but wisdom listens.”

The ‘philosopher’ was none other than Jimi Hendrix.

I may be the first sitting UN Secretary-General to give a public address in Seattle.  
But... I am certainly the first to quote Hendrix.

You know, I just had a grilling session by the student body. Fifty of your fellow students just quizzed me on the State of the World. I felt like a PhD student defending my thesis.

You may call this an honorary doctorate degree. But I think I just earned it!

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am not sure whether this is appropriate in this very solemn ceremony to say a few words of my personal reflection.

People say that good things come to those who wait. I know that is true. I will tell you why.

Almost 40 years ago, when President Nixon of the United States had established a diplomatic relationship with the Peoples Republic of China, there was a high expectation in the United States about how to improve their relationship with the People Republic of China, and they might have wanted to have some perspectives of an Asian person.

I was a very junior, young Foreign Ministry official at that time, and I learned that one of the most prestigious universities in the United States was sponsoring a full-ride scholarship for a student from my part of the world for China studies.

It was the University of Washington. And I leapt at the chance.

So I studied, and worked hard, and I took extra exams, I put everything into it.

And, one day, a letter arrived. I was selected for an interview. I was so excited. I was invited to come to a certain place called the Royal Hotel in Seoul. I was sure that I would get it. When I went to the Royal Hotel I was surprised to find just a dozen of Korean citizens – professors, government officials, who were waiting for an interview by a professor who was dispatched from the University of Washington. At that time I realized that it was not just only from Korea, they were selecting one person, one future scholar in all of Asia. Maybe in my part of Asia.

What could I do? I went through with the exam, with the interview. And fortunately I came out outstanding; I was selected as the candidate from Korea.

One day, another letter came from the University of Washington. They told me that it was good news. But I was only the first runner-up. They said if their first choice could not accept, then I would be selected. They told me to wait. And I have waited, and waited! Forty years.

And here I am, and I thank you very much.

I am proud to call myself a Husky. My voice has become husky!

Thank you very much for welcoming me into your very distinguished, prestigious family.

I accept this Honorary Doctorate not for myself, but for the organization I serve – the United Nations.

By honouring me you are recognizing the central role of the United Nations in shaping our world.

As I look on this sea of faces – many young, some older and more seasoned – I see the faces of the world – a United Nations of sorts. America's great strength is that its citizens trace their heritage to all corners of the world.

Our stories are diverse but we hold our dreams in common.

The United Nations, too, is built on a common dream. A pledge to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war... to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights... to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.

This is the pledge of the United Nations Charter.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to talk today about what the United Nations does and how it is growing more relevant in our fast-changing world.

Since the United Nations Charter was signed, the Cold War has come and gone. Development has lifted hundreds of millions of people from poverty. Technological advances have connected and empowered people the world over.

Over the same period, global population has tripled. The number of hungry people now tops one billion.

Environmental resources are under increasing pressure. Human activities are changing the global climate.

Poverty and human rights abuses feed instability in too many countries.

All are issues for the United Nations. That is what I am dealing with.

Since 1945, the United Nations has helped to negotiate more than 170 peace agreements. We have helped establish more than 500 multinational treaties on everything from the environment, trade and international crime to the norms that govern our seas, skies and outer space.

With UN help, more than 80 countries achieved their independence and sit now among the family of nations as sovereign states.

Today, people look to the United Nations across a broad agenda of aspiration and need. They look to us to defeat poverty and hunger. They look to us to keep the peace, to expand education and to stand up for human rights in every corner of the globe.

They look to us to stop the spread of deadly weapons and disease, and to protect people and families hit by disasters.

We deliver more humanitarian aid than anyone, any country – and to the toughest places.

Every day we feed more than 100 million people.

Every day we help more than 30 million refugees, most of them women and children fleeing war and persecution.

We are deploying more peacekeepers than ever – more than 115,000 – to save lives and protect the vulnerable.

And in the last year alone, we provided electoral assistance to almost 50 countries.

Countries such as Afghanistan where we have helped to give a voice to a war-torn population... where we have helped Afghanistan's Electoral Institutions to expose and correct fraud where it has occurred... where we have moved swiftly to support a presidential run-off that can produce a legitimate and credible partner for the international community.

Together, we are working to stabilize Afghanistan for the benefit of its people... the region... and the world.

This is, ladies and gentlemen, your United Nations.

In the past year, the entire United Nations has mobilized to face the global economic crisis.

No-one has been immune. Here in Seattle foreclosures are still on the rise.

Around the world people face a precarious future. Many of the near poor are becoming the new poor. One hundred million more people could fall below the poverty line this year.

Markets may be bouncing back, but incomes and jobs are not.

I have repeatedly emphasized to world leaders that they must not leave the poor behind.

This crisis is just one of many hitting us at one time. Volatility in prices for energy ... food insecurity ... the flu pandemic... the global recession... and climate change.

All demonstrate how closely our fates are interlinked.

Such challenges demand full and better collaboration – all nations working together for common solutions.

They demand a renewed multilateralism, rooted in rights and responsibilities and the principles of the United Nations Charter... they demand stronger global solidarity that delivers resources and political will... they demand an effective United Nations.

The United States is central to the renewed multilateralism.

I welcome President Obama's vigorous engagement.

In his address to the United Nations General Assembly last month, President Obama told his fellow leaders, and I quote: “The United States stands ready to begin a new chapter of international cooperation – one that recognizes the rights and responsibilities of all nations.”

A major test of the new cooperation is just around the corner. In just six weeks, national negotiators will meet at the Copenhagen climate change conference. Rights and responsibilities are at the core of the negotiations.

Solutions will not come easily. The issues are so complex. They affect national economies and individual lifestyles. They involve political trade-offs and a significant commitment of resources.

Yet... all the ingredients for a successful deal are on the table.

Copenhagen does not need to resolve all the details, but countries must agree to a deal that establishes an ambitious framework for progress on fundamental issues. It must involve all countries, consistent with their capabilities, working toward common, long-term goals.

Those goals must include reducing greenhouse gas emissions and limiting global temperature rise to a scientifically safe level. They must include mid-term targets for emission reductions by developed countries and actions by developing countries to limit the growth of their emissions, as well as funding for these. These are their responsibilities.

I would like to thank you here for how the University of Washington is living up to its responsibility by committing to work towards climate neutrality.

I thank the Honourable Governor Gregoire for her leadership and courage to participate in the Copenhagen Summit. I need such leadership.

Every one for you can play a role. Each and every one has a role to play.

It's not only governments and mayors – the business community leaders, family members and students and professors can all play a role. Just by simply changing your lifestyle, in your family, at your company and at your school, you can contribute towards reducing green-gas emissions.

This is exactly why I am standing here, thanking you for your commitment but also encouraging you further to do more.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Rights and responsibilities are central, too, to ridding the world of nuclear weapons. In 1946, the United Nations General Assembly's first resolution set the

goal of eliminating such weapons. After many years, the issue is back where it belongs: at the top of the global agenda.

The Presidents of United States and the Russian Federation have begun their negotiations to have a parallel measure, a parallel agreement to the START treaty. This is a golden opportunity.

But let us also remember: Ultimately, peace and security lies in the words I quoted from the United Nations Charter... “Social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom”.

Hunger and poverty, inadequate shelter and sanitation, gross inequality and disrespect for human rights... they create political instability, civil unrest and failed states.

We have seen progress toward the Millennium Development Goals, but not enough... especially in Africa.

Next September, world leaders will hold a special summit... a final push to reach the goals by the target date of 2015.

The goal on which we lag farthest behind, the slowest moving goal, is maternal health. Every single minute, a woman dies of complications during pregnancy and childbirth. That is unacceptable.

It is unacceptable that two hundred million women lack access to safe and effective contraception... that women are routinely victims of sexual violence... that girls are married off as child brides... that women are murdered for so-called ‘honour’... that genital mutilation and other harmful ‘traditions’ still exist in the world.

Whenever and wherever women and girls are denied the same rights and opportunities as men and boys, the United Nations must heed the call to action.

Ladies and gentlemen,

These are the issues that fill my days. These are the issues that I bring to the table with world leaders. They are my passion.

When President Roosevelt helped found the United Nations, he envisioned the role of Secretary-General as a “world moderator”.

Each day I seek to live up to this standard. I speak up for the principles of the United Nations Charter. I give voice to the voiceless. I defend the defenseless.

Wherever I go in the world, whenever I speak to world leaders, I remind them of their solemn pledge under the United Nations Charter. I hold up the mirror of accountability, the banner of justice. I speak of rights and responsibilities.

Distinguished Faculty Members,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

This morning, I met with Bill and Melinda Gates. They understand rights and responsibilities. They are using their wealth to make the world a better place.

They are working to roll back AIDS, Tuberculosis and malaria... to improve food security... to empower women.

They are working in the spirit of renewed multilateralism.

Multilateralism is not just about governments. It is about all of us. You and me, businesses and civil society organizations all round the world. We all have a stake in our common future.

I speak especially to the young people, the students, in the room. I appeal to your energy... your optimism... your sense of justice and innate hope.

When I was a young man, growing up in post-war Korea, everything around me was in ruin. We were in poverty.

We went hungry. Our homes and cities were destroyed. We had lost so many of our friends and families.

Then came the United Nations. The United Nations helped us rebuild. It was our beacon of hope.

Still today, to many people in the developing countries, the United Nations is their beacon of hope.

That is why I stand with you today.

I dreamed, one day, of working for the United Nations. I dreamed of making the world a better place, just as the UN did for me and my country.

Now it is your turn. And it is my turn too.

Together, we must unite and work for a better world. A world where human rights are cherished and protected. A world where children do not go hungry. A world where girls and boys go to school and live healthy and prosperous lives.

These are the dreams of the United Nations. These are the rights of humankind.

Let us all accept our responsibility to help every man, woman and child on Earth. Let us all help to make these dreams become reality.

Thank you very much