Federal Foreign Office (Germany) — auswaertiges-amt.de

Speech by Foreign Minister Steinmeier at the General Assembly of the United Nations

2015-10-01

Mr President,

Excellencies, esteemed colleagues,

70 years ago, a ray of light penetrated the dark 20th century: the United Nations was founded.

This was a pivotal moment for our world.

But it came not against a backdrop of glorious sunshine and pastures green.

It was amid the ruins of the Second World War, over 50 million graves, as the winter of the Cold War spread its frosty fingers, that the mothers and fathers of the United Nations forged the foundations of a new order. An order that is not perfect, but which had often enough protected us from relapsing into old barbaric ways.

Today, seventy years on, it is obvious that we are again living in restless times.

Millions of people are sorely affected by wars and violence. More than 60 million people have fled their homes – more than at any time since the end of World War II.

The foundations of the United Nations are still strong. But the world order built thereon has come loose from its moorings. The old balance of power is under pressure. Powerful new players have emerged on the world stage. And above all, it is non-state actors who are increasingly responsible for war and violence, for whom there are no rules – not even the minimum standards enshrined in the international law of war.

We thus urgently need new buttresses and pillars so that the order based on the United Nations can withstand the tempests of our times. What form could these new pillars take? What should the world order of tomorrow look like?

I don’t think there is any theoretical answer to that question. The only answer is a practical one! Just as the Charter of the United Nations was adopted as a bold response to war and suffering, new pillars will only be formed today if states are ready to assume responsibility and together find concrete answers to the crises of our times:

- to poverty and under-development,

- to refugees and migration,

- to the devastating civil war in Syria and failing states across the arc of crisis from Libya to Afghanistan,

- to religious extremism and terrorism and the murderous deeds of the people who call themselves Islamic State.

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There is however one major difference between now and the situation 70 years ago. The world of today is more closely interconnected than ever before. Borders are becoming indistinct.

In this age of globalisation, some say, the world has become a village.

If that is so, esteemed colleagues, then we are all neighbours!

In which case, I would advise us to act as good neighbours!

We come from very different backgrounds. We have different traditions and religions, different values and worldviews. This diversity must be respected – no worldview takes precedence over any other. But I can think of no culture in which people are unaware what it means to be a good neighbour, and in which people do not appreciate living in an atmosphere of good neighbourliness.

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Nobody is investing so much hope in this spirit of good neighbourliness today than the millions of women, men and children who have fled their homes. My country has assumed responsibility for them over the past months. Since the start of the year, we have taken in 600,000 refugees; at present up to 10,000 new refugees are arriving every day. These figures show that even we cannot shoulder this task alone in the long term. We need a European solution! A solution that moreover builds on close cooperation with our neighbours around the Mediterranean, especially Turkey.

Secondly, the United Nations' relief agencies –

UNHCR

, the World Food Programme,

UNRWA

and OCHA – all help people in need, on the spot with no intermediaries. It is scandalous that these organisations are so under-funded that they have to cut food rations and medical aid! I therefore met with the G7 states and other partners the day before yesterday, and am delighted to report that together we have raised an additional 1.8 billion dollars – of which over 100 million come from Germany – for the

UN

relief agencies. This also helps relieve the burden on the neighbouring countries in which the huge majority of refugees arrive – especially Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. They too need our help so that one exodus does not trigger another.

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But good neighbourliness comprises more than just humanity and compassion. Good neighbourliness also presupposes that we agree on joint rules we all have to obey. These include respecting each other's borders and sovereignty. This fundamental norm is still being violated, even in Europe. As the European Union, we unanimously condemned Russia's annexation of the Crimea and the actions in eastern Ukraine, and we responded; but not only by means of condemnation and isolation, but also by launching a political process to defuse the conflict. The

OSCE

has played an indispensable role in this process from the outset. We want to further strengthen the

OSCE

as an institution for our common security when we Germans assume its Chairmanship next year.

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That too, active political responsibility, is also part and parcel of good neighbourliness. A neighbourhood in which nobody looks beyond their garden gate will not be worth living in for long. People have to look, because there are many conflicts that can only be solved in concert, by means of multilateral diplomacy. This may take time and perseverance – but it works!

This summer the five permanent members of the Security Council and Germany concluded an agreement with Iran. After more than ten years of negotiations, we not only managed to ensure that Iran will never have an atomic bomb, and that we can verify this. We have also brought many actors, including Russia and the US, to sit at the same table. The negotiations

have thus proven that while neighbours may not like each other, they can still solve problems together – indeed they must do so, if living together is not to become unbearable for them both.

The agreement thus reached has created common ground on which greater security can be established in the Middle East, provided we do not slacken in our efforts!

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However, the realities are still somewhat different. In Syria the slaughter is already in its fifth year and still knows no end. We will only stop it by acting together. We have to:

- end the brutality of Assad's dictatorship, as evinced by its use of barrel bombs and torture;

- break the control of Islamic State;

- and silence the guns in Syria, and provide for humanitarian access.

For we also have commons goals:

- to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria,

- and to restore conditions in which all ethnic and religious groups can live in peace with each other and in peace with neighbouring countries.

These are goals that all actors believe in, whatever differences may exist between the US and Russia, between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

We already have a joint basis for action towards these goals, Security Council Resolution 2139.

What matters now is implementing it – together with all stakeholders. This is a first step. This appeal is directed most especially at Syria's neighbours. But not only at them. Instead of lone decisions by individual countries, most recently Russia, to start taking direct military action in Syria, we need Russia to take political action advocating transition in Syria. That would be an important contribution to overcoming the stalemate. For this is a lethal stalemate which claims new lives every day.

At the risk of repeating myself, let me stress that when dealing with a humanitarian catastrophe as horrifying as the one in Syria, we are all neighbours! That is what we must all remind ourselves of, and crawl out of our diplomatic trenches! There will not be a military solution. And neither supposed "eternal truths" nor "national interests" must be allowed to obstruct an effort to take the first steps towards defusing the conflict.

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Esteemed colleagues,

In these restless times, the idea of global good neighbourliness would be no more than a dream if there wasn’t already an umbrella, a roof, under which global neighbourliness has been practised for decades. Today we need the United Nations more than ever. We need a legitimate and responsive United Nations!

That is why Germany is campaigning for the reform of the United Nations and the Security Council. That is why we are working with others on the major global projects: on the ambitious sustainable development goals contained in Agenda 2030, which has just been adopted, and on the equally if not more ambitious goals to combat climate change, which we hope to adopt together in Paris this December.

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The United Nations provides a framework, a roof, for our global endeavours.

But under this roof, the work must continue at many levels.

We Germans believe the way forward lies in regional cooperation in the European Union and the

OSCE

, and in cooperation with other regional organisations such as ASEAN and the African Union.

Secondly, we are committed to re-establishing and stabilising weakening state structures across the arc of crisis from Libya to Iraq and Afghanistan.

And thirdly, especially in our capacity as Presidency of the Human Rights Council, we are championing the fundamental importance of human rights. For no political order can endure if the people are not secure in their rights.

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To conclude, distinguished colleagues, I would like to return to the founding of the

UN

70 years ago.

As magnificent as this moment was, it also inspires a sense of great humility in me as a German, because the Charter of the United Nations was indeed partly a response of humankind to the war and inhumanity which had originated in my country.

Over the seven decades that have passed since then, Germany has been fortunate enough to be gradually and cautiously welcomed back into the heart of the international community.

For that we Germans are grateful.

But we are also aware of our responsibility.

When Willy Brandt became the Federal Chancellor of Germany in 1969, he said:

“We Germans want to be a people of good neighbours.” At the time Germany was still divided, and these words were meant as a gesture of reconciliation towards Poland, France and the other European neighbours which had suffered greatly at German hands.

Today, when a Syrian family in Berlin tells me their tale of war and expulsion, Brandt’s words take on a new meaning. Now the world has become smaller, but the crises are no fewer, and it is time for us to reaffirm once again:

We Germans want to be a people of good neighbours, in equal measure to those both near and far. Thank you very much.

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