Speech by Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier at the constituent meeting of the UN’s new Scientific Advisory Board

2014-01-30

-- Translation of advance text --

Secretary General Ban Ki moon,

Director General Bokova,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Forty years ago the Federal Republic of Germany acceded to the United Nations. On that occasion Willy Brandt became the first Federal Chancellor to address the General Assembly. In his speech he made a point which is as relevant today as it was then.

“Some of the criticism directed at the United Nations”, he noted, “sounds bitter and cynical, is filled with almost jubilant pessimism, as if it stemmed from a secret hope that the weaknesses of the Organisation would refute the idea and the purpose. But setbacks in pursuit of an ideal do not necessarily prove that the ideal is wrong but often merely that the road to it could be better.”

We’re all familiar with the prejudices surrounding the United Nations. In view of current conflicts and global challenges, the world organisation is too weak, inefficient and ineffectual, it is claimed. But hasn’t this past week alone shown us how indispensable the United Nations is?

After three years of civil war, over 130,000 deaths and seven million people driven from their homes, the United Nations managed in Montreux to get Syria’s warring parties around a table.

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inspectors are supervising the destruction at long last of Syria’s chemical weapons. Tens of thousands in South Sudan have found shelter in

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camps.

The meeting in Montreux may have seemed to some a defeat for international diplomacy. Yet if you consider what incredible violence and atrocities the warring parties have inflicted on each other, you realise what a success it was to get them not only around a table but also sitting in the same room together.

Without initial steps like these, which can lead to bigger advances, any political solution, however insistently demanded, will remain illusory. Only initial steps like these can spark a glimmer of hope for concrete improvements such as local ceasefires and humanitarian access. These are small steps, certainly. But given how long this suffering has gone on, every single step counts.

Political observers see the United Nations far too often as a remote institution with tortuous conflict solving processes that simply can’t keep up with the speed with which new crises erupt elsewhere.

There’s another thing, too. Any war, crisis or conflict supplies images. Talks that inch along patiently for months without a breakthrough are devoid of journalistic interest.

But day in, day out the United Nations is for a great many people a friend in need. For Syrian children who’ve endured hardship and danger to reach safety finally at Zaatari refugee camp. For the victims of the civil war in the Central African Republic or the victims of the earthquake in the Philippines, for whom the

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provides shelter and medical care.

In the world’s hot spots the United Nations is a concrete source of hope for people in need. For them the sky blue

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flag is a symbol of international solidarity.

There’s one thing that those who lament the deficiencies of the United Nations shouldn’t forget: the world organisation steps in when nation states are up against their limits. It helps in places where others have long thrown in the towel. It operates in places where there are no simple solutions. The United Nations provides the only roof and structure capable of offering universally binding solutions.

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architecture is in need of reform – of that there's no doubt. But reforms are needed not because the United Nations has become redundant. They are needed because it is indispensable.

What we want is to gear our world organisation to 21st century realities. Here the values enshrined in the

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Charter are as relevant as ever.

Take work in the development field, for example. We need the United Nations structure if we're to pull together effectively to advance the Millennium Development Goals.

And we need this structure, too, to help us evolve a common, long term development agenda for the post 2015 period.

In 1973 Willy Brandt announced to the assembled members of the United Nations: "We have come to assume a share in the responsibility for world affairs on the basis of our convictions and within the scope of our possibilities."

This is the yardstick by which we want to be judged also in future. Our engagement with and for the United Nations will remain one of the hallmarks of German foreign policy.

That's why we need to have an honest debate about our country's role in the world.

What does "assuming a share in the responsibility for world affairs," as Willy Brandt put it, mean in practice, here and now? And how exactly do we define "our possibilities"? What are our goals? What costs and risks are we ready to bear in pursuit of these goals?

It's my firm belief that also in future Germany must not only be engaged financially, we must also be engaged with people and on the ground. That doesn't mean flinging ourselves into military adventures.

As I said just yesterday in my speech in the German Bundestag, a policy of military restraint is a good thing. There's little evidence that military intervention tends to make things better. Military restraint is a good thing certainly, but it mustn't mean standing aloof as a matter of principle.

Right now there are nearly 6,000 German soldiers, police officers and civilian experts serving with

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peace missions or

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mandated missions.

And we're discussing with our allies in what other ways we might enhance our engagement in future. In Mali, for example, we're considering whether we could increase our training assistance for the country's security forces.

Germany has significantly stepped up its contributions to the humanitarian aid effort. In 2013 the German Government provided a record 358 million euros to relieve suffering in a range of humanitarian crisis situations.

Another way we've sought to do this was our decision to take in 10,000 refugees from Syria currently living in neighbouring countries.

What we're doing to help the Syrians illustrates how we're assuming growing responsibility in

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affairs and how the nature of this responsibility is changing.

Germany now hosts a range of important

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bodies in Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, Hamburg and above all Bonn. Bonn has become a centre for sustainability, climate protection and development. Over the years ahead we'll continue to provide the United Nations with the best possible environment for its activities here.

So I'm very pleased, Secretary General, that tomorrow you'll be seeing our

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city of Bonn with your own eyes.

It's a source of pride for us, Secretary General, that you've chosen Berlin as the venue for the constituent meeting of your new Scientific Advisory Board. We see this choice both as a tribute to our

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engagement and an incentive to do still more.

The distinguished scientists on the Board will serve the organisation’s top leadership not only in an academic capacity but also as partners who speak for society at large. The job of the Board, as I see it, will be more than providing wise counsel from inside the ivory tower.

It will be to assist you, Secretary General, in the process of translating scientific findings into realistic policy.

A first test for this ambitious undertaking will be the debate I mentioned earlier on long term development goals for the post 2015 agenda. We all look forward with keen interest both to the work you’ll be doing and to our future collaboration.

We wish you a very successful start. You are most welcome here in the Federal Foreign Office – today and also in future. And you can count of course on Germany’s active cooperation and support.

Thank you very much.

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