

Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier to the German Bundestag on the 70th anniversary of the United Nations

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14.10.2015 - Speech 

Mr President, fellow members of this House,

“We should, rather, recognize the United Nations for what it is – an admittedly imperfect but indispensable instrument of nations working for a peace evolution towards a more just and secure world order.” These words do not stem from me, but from Dag Hammarskjöld, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and known for his often philosophical bites of wisdom, sometimes bordering on the mystical. What we have heard here about the United Nations, however, has been absolutely pragmatic and absolutely accurate. Because even today, decades later, we still need the United Nations more than ever as we seek peace at this time of such conflict.

The United Nations will never be perfect. But, for that reason, we must try all the harder to make it better. There is no alternative. We need a United Nations with an ability to act. It is our duty to safeguard the United Nations, and to keep on reshaping it.

It was very clear at this year’s General Assembly in New York a few days ago what a huge need there is for joint action. “United Nations Seventieth Anniversary” – that was the headline. But General Assembly week was dominated not by grand receptions and celebrations, but by serious, intensive, sometimes despairing negotiations.

And no wonder. More than 60 million people have fled their homes worldwide – the greatest number since the establishment of the United Nations. They are fleeing the devastating civil war in Syria; they are fleeing conflicts and violence in the arc of crisis from Libya to Afghanistan; they are fleeing religious extremism and terrorism, the barbarity of the so-called “Islamic State”. Thousands more are seeking to escape poverty, underdevelopment and the lack of prospects for the future. And, increasingly, many are leaving behind countries plagued by drought, or flooding, or other consequences of climate change. Ultimately the United Nations will have to be measured by its responses

to these challenges. Yes, but its endeavours all too often fail because the ~~UN~~ (United Nations) member states quite simply rob it of its authority and its capacity for action by refusing to cooperate or by blocking measures for months. So what I want to say to all those who bemoan the ~~UN~~ (United Nations)'s alleged weakness day in, day out is this: it's not the United Nations, it's its members. The United Nations can never be stronger than its members allow it to be. That's why we must appeal to the member states of the United Nations!

The main item on the agenda at this year's General Assembly was Syria. The conflict is now in its fifth year, and there is no end to the murder, and nor is there any sign that the international community has found a way to put an end to the war. This war, which has claimed over 250,000 lives and forced 12 million people to flee, is a huge tragedy. If you take a closer look, it is also a story of missed opportunities. Two Geneva Conferences on Syria went by without us finding a solution. A proposal from former ~~UN~~ (United Nations) peace facilitator Kofi Annan was rejected before it had properly been considered – a proposal which everyone would love to go back and take up today, if that were still possible. Many states give only half-hearted support to the current special envoy, Staffan de Mistura.

For my part, I'd like to add this: I find the universal calls we're hearing just now that we need to talk to Assad a bit annoying. Not that I think it is wrong to be in contact with representatives of the regime as well to try to arrive at a solution, but I would have liked that kind of support myself ten years ago when I paid two visits to Syria and said it seemed to me that it was precipitate to include Syria in the axis of evil and that I didn't know whether isolating Syria would really have the right result in the end. It is sometimes annoying when those who said then "We mustn't go there!" now say, after five years of civil war and 250,000 deaths, that we have to talk to Assad. We could have done this differently.

It is true that finding a starting-point for political solutions is extremely difficult. And undoubtedly Russia's military engagement in recent days has not made it any easier. Let me say once again quite clearly: the fight against ISIS and other Islamist terror groups is a necessary one. Nevertheless, we know that in the end the conflict in Syria will not be resolved on the battlefield. Instead, we need at least a starting-point for a political settlement and the de-escalation of the conflict. No-one can do this alone; we need everyone to act together. Above all, we need the actors in the region, like Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia. We need Europe. We need the United States. But given the situation, particularly the situation that has arisen over the past few days and weeks, we also know that it will not happen without Russia.

We need to move towards a political solution now, not at some vague point in the future. We need to find the starting-point now, as long as there are still institutions in Syria that can be changed. We've seen in Libya what happens when institutions collapse. Every day we see how hard it is to rebuild a state that has collapsed. That is why we now need to find a starting-point for transformation in Syria, in other words for the formation of an interim government.

Unfortunately the ~~UN (United Nations)~~ General Assembly in New York did not manage to take that crucial first step. The differences between the US and Russia at the time were too great, as were those between Saudi Arabia and Iran. I believe we must now approach things from both sides. On the one hand, we must exhort the US and Russia not to use their military engagement in such a way that conflict erupts between them; on the other, we must help to build bridges between Iran and Saudi Arabia. To that end, I visited Kuwait last weekend, and this weekend I will be in Iran and Saudi Arabia. That is not to say that there has been any progress. But if you are looking for small shoots of hope, then the fact that Russia is sending Prime Minister Medvedev to Washington for political talks may be a good sign. It seems to suggest that even beyond the so-called military deconflicting there is a desire to keep up contact with the US in matters relating to Syria.

My plea now is that we do not organise a standstill; we must not wait until the members of any future interim government have been chosen and accepted. Rather, we must agree now on a set of principles which must not be up for debate. First of all, the fight against ISIS and, the main goal of our efforts, the preservation of the Syrian state's territorial integrity. Secondly, we must ensure that Syria will be a secular state in future, a state which – and here is the third principle – demonstrates respect for the different ethnic and religious groups in the country. Avoiding standstill also means ensuring that all partners undertake not only to work on future resolutions, which might be up in the air for quite some time yet, but also to implement existing resolutions, for instance ~~UN (United Nations)~~ Security Council Resolution 2139, which prohibits the use of barrel bombs and calls for unhindered humanitarian access. Even with the current state of affairs, that must be possible.

In a situation like this, some people say “That's all very well, but there's no point to it all. Nothing's going to come of it anyway.” I've heard that often enough over ten years of negotiations with Iran. But this sentence is taboo for foreign policy makers! Rather, efforts in foreign policy are effective when you are on the right track, when you stay focused and determined, when you don't lose energy or concentration, when you work resolutely towards your goal. The negotiations with Iran proved that! I believe that with the nuclear deal we have at least created a foundation to ensure that we might have more security rather than less in the Middle East in future. That will not happen all by itself; Iran will not change all by itself. Rather, we have to take the next steps. Responsibility does not end with the signature on the agreement; responsibility carries on. We are entering the next phase, in which we need to try to persuade Iran to change from being a disturber of the security order in the Middle East to playing a constructive part. That is the task facing us.

Ladies and gentlemen, we cannot talk about Syria without also talking about its neighbours. It is in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey that we find the largest number of refugees – four million at the last count. We have to support these countries and the refugees themselves if we are to avoid one exodus triggering another. The ~~UN (United Nations)~~ aid agencies are providing essential assistance, directly where it's needed. But the funding deficit facing the ~~UNHCR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner~~

for Refugees) programmes and the World Food Programme remains severe – so severe that daily food rations have been halved. First of all, that is a humanitarian scandal – and secondly, it means we can't really feign surprise when more people from refugee camps set out for Europe. We therefore need to change that situation. We have made use of our time in the G7 Presidency. We issued invitations not only to the G7 countries but also to other states which we had the impression could do more to help, and we held a donor conference in New York. I am glad to report that we and the other states, plus the European Union, were able to mobilise 1.8 billion dollars for the UN (United Nations) aid agencies. Germany is providing 100 million euros to that amount. This sent a good and important message and encouraged others to follow suit. My thanks to all those who supported the decision.

Alongside the burning humanitarian issues, we always need long-term responses to the causes of flight and migration. Here too, we need the United Nations. We spoke in New York about what tools the UN (United Nations) actually has at its disposal to combat the causes of displacement and help improve burden-sharing. We'll pick up that discussion here in Berlin in just over two weeks' time. I'll be meeting representatives of the UN (United Nations) relief agencies to talk about cooperation with representatives of the regions where poverty is causing people to leave en masse. We'll be focusing chiefly on African countries there, in preparation for the EU (European Union)-Africa Summit to be held in Valletta shortly afterwards.

Whenever we identify brewing conflicts and take preventive action, we are counteracting the causes of flight. I call it precautionary foreign policy, and I intend to make our foreign policy fit that mould more and more closely – including in the United Nations. I'm thinking there about everything from civilian crisis prevention to stabilisation of fragile states to good-governance projects. I'm thinking, for example, of our involvement, together with the EU (European Union) and the UN (United Nations), in the reconciliation process in Mali. Another example is mediation, an area where we will be enhancing the UN (United Nations)'s capacities. We want to establish a sort of rapid-response unit – not a military force but a rapid-response team for the negotiating table!

Peacekeeping belongs in this context too – and here too, we find ourselves called upon to contribute. Providing finance is part of that, but I have also heard the call from the heart of this parliament for us to do more than just supply funding. I am talking to the Defence Minister about how we can meet the expectations of the United Nations, for example by delivering capabilities to make UN (United Nations) missions more successful. I believe Germany has quite a bit to offer in this regard: civilian, police and military capabilities. We intend to work together – Federal Foreign Office, Defence Ministry and Development Ministry – to ensure the UN (United Nations) is better equipped in those areas in future.

Our contributions to peacekeeping include a very real human dimension. I'd like at this point to do something we don't often have a chance to do and thank all the Germans providing their services in and for the United Nations. It's impossible to thank everyone individually, but I give you the example of Martin Kobler, who served until recently in the largest and perhaps most difficult peace mission, in the Congo, and is now facing fresh

challenges for the ~~UN~~(United Nations). That's someone who stands out. Another such example is Achim Steiner, who put in many years of dedicated and impassioned work as head of the ~~UN~~(United Nations) Environment Programme and is now taking on a new role too. These two are representative of many others working in various parts of the ~~UN~~(United Nations). Let's take a moment to express our respect for them.

As my colleague Manuela knows, when we talk about human resources, we Germans on occasion ask our ~~UN~~(United Nations) partners what role women play in peacekeeping and conflict resolution. One thing is for sure: no conflict can be conclusively resolved if half the population is excluded from such efforts. Resolution 1325 on gender equality in conflict resolution and reconstruction is therefore a milestone not only for women's participation but also for the political pursuit of peace.

In a speech she gave more than 50 years ago, Eleanor Roosevelt asked, "Where, after all, do universal human rights begin?" Her answer was "close to home" – in neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces. That was where we needed to uphold human rights, Eleanor Roosevelt said. In these places, as our constitution puts it, "Human dignity shall be inviolable". Yes, we have a responsibility to ensure that human rights are respected in everyday life. Human rights are not just for Germans! Some people who obviously know that are the many volunteers in this country who have been selflessly taking care of refugees; they too have our most heartfelt thanks. But Roosevelt's words not only apply to the situation here but also to the home regions from which those refugees have fled. It has perhaps never been more apparent that human rights, peace and security are indivisible. Wherever human rights are systematically abused, where oppression and persecution reign, there you will find people fleeing and being forcibly displaced. That's yet another reason why human rights are not a side issue for us. We actively support them, not least through our chairmanship of the ~~UN~~(United Nations) Human Rights Council right now, which Germany's Ambassador Rücker has navigated through some thoroughly difficult waters this year. There's yet another effort, ladies and gentlemen, that has earned our recognition.

How well the ~~UN~~(United Nations) can adapt and remain viable in future will depend on how representative it is and how much legitimacy it is afforded by its institutions. I think everyone can agree that legitimacy will suffer if the ~~UN~~(United Nations)'s institutions simply reflect the way things were in 1945. That's why we are insisting on ~~UN~~(United Nations) reform, and we are including Security Council reform in that. We want to see the work of the Security Council become more transparent, and we support initiatives to limit the right to veto, primarily the one put forward by our French partners. The veto does have a function rooted in historical circumstances. However, it simply cannot be the case that this privilege damns the entire global organisation to sit on its hands in the face of the most heinous crimes against humanity. This situation cannot be allowed to continue!

The United Nations demonstrated its capacity for reform just last week. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is ambitious. But agreement was reached nonetheless, on everything including all the associated financial instruments and review mechanisms

proposed by the Secretary-General. I can promise you that Germany will be one of the first countries to submit to a review of how well it is implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like in closing to return to the foundation of the United Nations 70 years ago – a magnificent moment that we in Germany should also see with a sense of humility. After all, the Charter of the United Nations was partly mankind's response to the war and inhumanity which had originated in our 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. We Germans are grateful for that, ladies and gentlemen. We are also aware that this brings with it a certain responsibility.

When he took office in 1969, Willy Brandt 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 conciliatory gesture towards Poland, France and the other European neighbours which had suffered greatly at German hands. Today, when Syrian families here in Berlin or in any of our constituencies tell us their tales of war and expulsion, Brandt's words take on a new meaning. The world has grown smaller, but the crises have grown worse. This is the time to reaffirm that intent: 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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