Vienna + 20 Conference

Keynote Speech by
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United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Vienna, 27 June 2013
Excellencies,  
Dear colleagues,  
Ladies and gentlemen,  

It is moving to be among so many friends today, in order to commemorate an occasion of such significance to me and to my Office.  

Twenty years ago, more than 7,000 participants gathered for the World Conference on Human Rights. Many of you were here, as was I – representing a women's activist group. All of us were anxious to achieve a good outcome.  

Western countries favoured civil and political rights; the Eastern bloc, and many developing nations, argued that economic, social and cultural rights, and the right to development, had priority. In addition, a sizeable group of countries were vigorously arguing that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was the product of a specifically Western culture, and that in reality human rights should be considered relative to the characteristics and traditions of different cultures.  

Moreover, the world was in the midst of a series of dramatic upheavals. Some of these – like the fall of the Berlin Wall – were very positive; and some – like the sudden rash of deeply destructive internal conflicts – extremely negative. It was the best of times and worst of times, forming the backdrop to the Vienna conference.  

The end of the Cold War had made it seem the right moment for a new world to review its agenda for human rights. But by the time the Conference took place, a terrible armed conflict was raging close by in the former Yugoslavia. Indeed, there were mass killings and other atrocities taking place less than a day’s drive from the conference rooms where the World Conference was taking place, and from where we are today.  

THE VIENNA CONSENSUS  

And yet, as discussions unfurled, a consensus emerged. The key to this was the notion of universality, indivisibility and interrelatedness of all human rights. You see, a number of States had been resisting the entire concept of economic and social rights – because they saw them as aspirations, rather than rights intrinsic to human dignity and freedom. The vision of an inter-related and inter-dependant constellation of human rights allowed for economic and social rights to be on board, as well as the right to development.  

The debate regarding the alleged cultural specificities of human rights was resolved with an equally deft and inclusive approach. Of course all countries are indeed not the same, and all voices must, naturally, be heard. But these cultural specificities in no way erode the universality of human rights.  

The formula that ultimately created consensus on this point was the following: you choose your path, but the goal is something we hold in common. Your specificity will influence the way you move forward. But that goal – of human dignity and human freedom, via implementation of the human rights elucidated in the International Bill of Rights – is something that we all share.  

And so the assembled delegates overcame major differences on contentious issues such as universality, sovereignty, impunity, and how to give a voice to victims. The result was a powerful outcome document: the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (VDPA).
The VDPA is the most significant human rights document produced in the last quarter of a century and one of the strongest human rights documents of the past hundred years. We owe it to the good will and hard work of many dedicated and experienced professionals led by Ibrahima Fall. It crystalized the principle that human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated, and firmly entrenched the notion of universality by committing States to the promotion and protection of all human rights for all people “regardless of their political, economic, and cultural systems.”

The Vienna Conference led to historic advances in many vital areas, among them women’s rights; the fight against impunity; the rights of minorities and migrants; the rights of children.

Much progress has occurred during the past two decades, thanks to the path laid down in Vienna. We can justly celebrate a number of important landmark agreements, including on the world’s first permanent International Criminal Court – the creation of which received a significant boost at Vienna – as well as new mechanisms to promote and protect the human rights of women, minorities, migrant workers and their families and other groups. Vienna opened the door to stronger UN human rights mechanisms, including an expansion – that still continues today – in the number of Special Procedures. Until Vienna, they had all been focused on civil and political rights. Today, the 48 Special Procedures cover the entire spectrum of human rights.

Vienna also provided a significant boost to the Treaty Bodies – which are also continuing to expand, as more States ratify more human rights treaties – and to the important system of National Human Rights Institutions which are now to be found in 103 countries. Of these, 69 are currently accredited with ‘A’ status.

But we must recognize that in many areas, we have failed to build on the foundations of the VDPA. The inspiring opening promise of the Universal Declaration – that all human beings are born equal in dignity and in rights, and that these will be respected as such – is still only a dream for far too many people.

FAILURE TO PROTECT

This week twenty years ago, snipers were gunning down children in the streets of Sarajevo, and the carnage of that hideous conflict darkened the horizon of Europe.

Today, only a little further away, the children, women and men of Syria cry out in pain and beg for our aid. And once again, we are failing them – as we have done in a succession of other horrific conflicts, including Afghanistan, Somalia, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Iraq – to name just a few.

Time and again, the international community has promised to protect civilians from slaughter and gross violations of rights. And yet even as I speak to you now, women are being abducted and raped, hospitals are being targeted, and indiscriminate shelling and deliberate massacres stain the earth with the blood of innocents.

All this is intolerable. And yet it continues to happen. Our progress along the path that we laid down in Vienna 20 years ago has been marked by constant setbacks as well as the many achievements I listed earlier. Some promises have been half fulfilled – for example in the area of international justice, where we have an international court, to which some deserving situations are
referred and others – including Syria – are not. But twenty years ago we had had no international courts at all since Nuremberg, despite the commission of international crimes.

In 2005, the World Summit – in a logical extension of all that had been agreed in Vienna – adopted by consensus the concept of the Responsibility to Protect. But Syria is just the latest example of a situation where we have failed dismally to live up to that responsibility – at the cost, so far, of more than 93,000 lives.

When we come here, we are not celebrating history. We are talking about a blueprint for a magnificent construction that is still only half built. It is essential that we view the VDPA as a living document that can and should continue to guide our actions and goals. Human rights are still not universally available, or viewed as indivisible and interrelated, despite our promise to make them so. States still continue to make arguments about cultural relativity. Women, minorities and migrants are still discriminated against and abused. The right to development is still not accepted by everybody. Power still corrupts, and leaders are still prepared to sacrifice their people in order to retain it.

THE WAY FORWARD

I believe this 20th anniversary provides us with a very important opportunity to go back to Vienna in order to rediscover the way forward.

It was in Vienna, 20 years ago, that non-governmental organizations spearheaded a drive for the creation of the post of High Commissioner for Human Rights. This was to ensure that an independent, authoritative voice would speak out against human rights violations wherever they occur; to coordinate and support the work of a range of different bodies; and to utilize the weight of the United Nations to support human rights for all.

It is my honour to occupy that post today, and I believe my Office has come a long way in the first two decades of its existence. But it, like so much else, is not a finished product. We have a huge task – to promote and protect the human rights of everyone everywhere – and clearly insufficient resources to carry it out. But I do believe the Office has filled a major vacuum in the UN system and become an increasingly strong and authoritative advocate for victims across the globe, a voice for the voiceless. And a voice, created by States, that is in a position to remind States of the laws and promises they have made which they are failing to live up to.

Another key achievement of Vienna was to provide a major boost to civil society organizations and other human rights defenders. They have expanded to a degree that was unimaginable at the time, especially at the national level. But they are also, today in 2013, facing unprecedented challenges, including restrictive laws and reprisals – even reprisals for taking part in UN proceedings on UN premises. In one way, perhaps, this is a measure of their impact. But it is also a deeply disturbing sign of regression.

We need to do our utmost to revive the spirit of the Vienna Declaration, and relearn its messages. We must refocus on its startling clarity of purpose which, at the time, we had scarcely dared hope to achieve. It reaffirmed the dignity and rights of all, and showed us how to achieve them. It crystalized the concepts of universality, and impartiality with regard to justice. It showed us the way forward, and to some extent we have followed that path. But, sadly, reprehensibly, we also continue all too often to deviate from it.

Thank you.