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General Assembly Opens Annual High-Level Debate: World Leaders Discuss Reform of the United Nations

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4 October 2007

The annual high-level debate of the General Assembly opened on 25 September 2007. On its conclusion, on 3 October 2007, 189 Member States and two Permanent Observers had delivered statements on a wide range of issues, including reform of the United Nations. The following is an attempt to summarize some of the main points made concerning reform.

On Tuesday 25 September 2007 Secretary-General, H.E. Ban Ki-moon opened the general debate of the 62nd General Assembly. The theme of Secretary-General's speech was "A Stronger United Nations for a Better World", and said that his administration would be focused on achieving results. "...We need to be faster, more flexible and mobile. We need to pay less attention to rhetoric, and more attention to results—to getting things done." In order to accomplish this goal there would need to be a continued pursuit of major management reform to promote transparency, accountability, and efficiency.

The Secretary-General welcomed the past nine months' effort to reorganize peacekeeping operations, streamline the budget process, better the financial situation of the UN as well as crafting the Capital Master Plan. Furthermore, he asked for greater emphasis on the progress of the Human Rights Council, and overall transforming the way that the United Nations conducts business, while finally noting that he plans to continue his efforts to strengthen the Department of Political Affairs.

Newly elected President of the General Assembly H.E. Dr. Srgjan Kerim also highlighted the importance of reforming management, coherence and effectiveness in his speech. "Modernizing our management and implementing greater coherence across the system will enable this organization to deliver better results."

On climate change, Mr. Kerim suggested creating a comprehensive roadmap to guide the way forward; however, "First we need to take stock to outline the instruments we have and structures necessary to address climate change then a clear vision of the way forward and, finally a strategy to get us there together."

While the main topic of the General Assembly debate was to focus on reacting to climate change, many of the 192 member states used their time to talk about the wide variety of UN reforms.

Brazil, one of the first countries to speak, stated the need to increase participation of developing countries in the major international decision-making bodies, specifically the UN Security Council. They also suggested reviewing the decision-making process within the international financial institutions.

The United States addressed the idea of expanding the membership of the Security Council. The US is not opposed to the idea and would support Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the Council. The US also asked for an institution that would adhere to strict ethical standards.

Kazakhstan concurred with the need to reform the UN. Kazakhstan also suggested that the Security Council increase in both permanent and non-permanent and that the seats be in line with an equitable geographic representation and respect for sovereign equality of states. Furthermore, Kazakhstan suggested the working methods of the Security Council be reformed to allow accountability and transparency and that the General Assembly should play a central role as the main representative body of the United Nations.

France affirmed its strong support for general reform of the United Nations.

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia agreed to the ideas of management reform as well as system-wide coherence. It was also announced that Macedonia will seek at term on the Human Rights Council 2008-2011.

Portugal, representing the European Union, called for further developments within system-wide coherence, management reforms, as well as effectiveness and transparency.

On climate, Portugal called for the upgrade of UNEP to a UN Environment Organization (UNEO): "The process for the establishment of a UNEO would build on existing processes, structures and systems and should be accompanied by a broader strategy strengthening the international environmental governance."

South Africa noted that the United Nations must adapt to the realities of the present world, and transform itself consistent with modern democratic ideals.

Iran called for a reexamination of the veto in the Security Council and whether or not to remove it.

Slovakia stated that an overall reform of the system of human rights protection was needed. Therefore Slovakia welcomed the commencement of the work of the Human Rights Commission as fresh start, and announced their intention to seek a seat for the term 2008-2011.

Slovakia remains committed to pursue reform of the UN management system. Slovakia also suggested the need to enlarge both permanent and non-permanent categories of the Security Council and stated its supports for the bid of both Japan and Germany for a permanent seat. They caution that non-permanent be restrained from flip-flopping between categories. Finally, they restated their firm support of the revitalization of the General Assembly.

Italy remarked that the need to reform the United Nations must remain equal and effective. The revitalization of the General Assembly, the main decision-making body of the United Nations, continues to be an essential aspect of any reform process.

Furthermore, Italy stated that it is opposed to any Security Council reform that proposes the addition of any permanent member to the Council: "The growing contribution of a growing number of a Countries to the Organization should not be wasted on elitist and selective reform."

Italy also hoped to reach an agreement, through the upcoming intergovernmental negotiating process, and based on non-divisive solutions; not predefined models, which could lead to eventual Security Council reform in the near future.

On the other hand, Germany advocated that the current Security Council does not reflect the current world today and declared its intentions to seek a permanent seat on the Council.

Latvia spoke on the need for management reform and that all forms of reform were slow in coming. Latvia also spoke on the need for system-wide coherence and advocated for a "One-UN" approach. Also, Latvia stated its support for the Security Council permanent seat bids of Japan, India, Germany and Brazil.

Switzerland also stated that it wished to improve the credibility and efficiency of the organization. Switzerland also said the body must continue to support the newly formed Peacebuilding Commission and Human Rights Council. In regards to the Security Council, Switzerland observed the need to improve the Council's working methods to ensure transparency and ensure those sanctioned be in conformity with the rule of law and human rights.

Finland saw the need to reform to better implement UN policies. Specifically, Finland wished to make ECOSOC more efficient, to continue strong action on the Human Rights Council, and support the new peacekeeping missions and Peacebuilding funds. Finland also advocated the need for system-wide coherence and strict adherence to the rule of law.

Turkmenistan suggested that reform should be goal oriented. Turkmenistan continued to state that relations between the General Assembly and Security Council needed to improve and both be more dynamic and seek transparency.

Lithuania spoke of reform in particular to the need of making the organization's operational system more consolidated and that they proceed with real actions as opposed to just talking.

Zambia agreed with the High-Level Panel on Reform that the UN needs more coherence and synergy and welcomes the mandate given to ECOSOC. Zambia also supported the movement to add two permanent seats on the Security Council representing Africa with full veto powers.

Botswana asked for consistency and compromise on the Security Council. Botswana also stated the desire to add both permanent, with the right of veto, and non-permanent members to the Council. Cuba suggested that the Security Council had been overstepping its boundaries and infringing upon the rights of other UN countries. Cuba also suggested that membership be expanded and that the developing countries represent the majority.

Bosnia and Herzegovina stated that they were disappointed that Security Council reform had stalled. Further, the need to revitalize and reform the GA, ECOSOC, and Security Council remains very high. There is also a need to examine possible Security Council membership in permanent, non-permanent status, as well as to look at regional representation and working methods, and that at least one new member on the Security Council come from Eastern Europe. Finally, Bosnia and Herzegovina announced their intentions to seek a non-permanent seat for the term 2010-2012.

Nigeria also stressed the importance and need for comprehensive reform. The goal of reform should be to strengthen and restructure. Nigeria also suggested the increase of both permanent seats and non-permanent seats with Africa fully represented on the Security Council.

Tanzania, as one of the "One UN" pilot countries, expressed its satisfaction with the ongoing process of system-wide coherence.

Singapore addressed many ideas of reform. Singapore stated the need for better global governance and that no government can act on its own with complete disregard for everyone other country. Singapore also called Russia, China, India and Brazil re-emergent powers and that this was a reason why institutions formed after the Second World War were in need of reexamination.

In regards to the Security Council Singapore suggested a closer look at the possible membership of Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan. Singapore also stressed the importance of medium and small countries in the UN system and that those countries needed to stop ensuring self interest by blocking each other. Every country cannot have the veto because a state of paralysis would exist. Finally, Singapore stressed the importance of international rules of law.

The Netherlands suggested that the role of international law be expanded. The Netherlands spoke of the need to expand the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

The United Kingdom spoke also of the need to reform the Security Council and supported the permanent membership bid of Germany, Japan, India, Brazil, and one country from Africa. While supporting these states for a permanent seat, the representative of the UK did state that the UK was open to other possible ideas of reform because the overall goal of achieving change is what is important.

Turkey stressed the need to reform in order to strengthen structures so that they might stand up to the near future. On Security Council reform, Turkey suggested any decision should be widely accepted and subject to changes that might need to arise. Turkey also declared its intention to seek a non-permanent seat on the Security Council in 2008.

China stated that the need to reform is crucial to “building a harmonious world,” and supported the overall idea of reform. China also stated that the Human Rights Council should seek cooperation as opposed to political confrontation. On the Security Council China stated they were open to the idea of increased membership included developing countries and was based on the widest possible consensus.

Romania suggested that any Security Council reform involving a transitional formula should be considered very carefully. The progressing stages would need to enjoy wide support. Security Council enlargement discussion should not prevent discussion on other roads of reform such as working methods, transparency, and possible veto limiting. Romania noted that at least one more non-permanent Security Council seat should be given to a member of the Eastern Europe group in the event of an expansion.

Japan stated that for the Security Council to live up to its expectations it would need to be more representative and effective. Japan suggested the enlargement of the Security Council in both permanent and non-permanent seats. By enlarging the Security Council Japan believed that the UN’s ability to provide peace and security would be enhanced. Japan also called for strong results in management reform.

Liechtenstein, like Singapore, concentrated on a number of different elements of reform. Liechtenstein discussed not only the need to reform the management elements of the UN but also to expand the rule of law, and expand the working methods of the Security Council by allowing states with a direct interest in cases access to Security Council members.

India also stated that reform would be incomplete without comprehensive reform and expansion of the current Security Council and the revitalization of the General Assembly. India called for inter-governmental negotiations in order to make the Council more democratic and representative.

India also remarked that it sought an increase in the number of both permanent and non-permanent members of the Security Council, as well as improvements in the working methods, while providing more representation for developing countries. Not stopping at the Security Council, India continued and suggested that the restoration of the General Assembly as the central body is another key point of reform.

San Marino noted its strong support for the revitalization of the General Assembly. As one of the driving forces behind last years attempt to strengthen the General Assembly, San Marino stressed the fundamental importance of the Assembly, as the main deliberative organ of the United Nations.

Denmark observed that strengthening the UN demands that member states agree on common goals and priorities. Priorities should especially relate to three of the unique features of the UN: Conflict resolution and prevention, strengthening the organization's role in the recovery phase following conflicts, and international norm-setting.

Denmark also reiterated its strong support for the "One UN"-process, aimed at strengthening the UN at country level, while noting that the General Assembly should keep its focus on decision-making and leave detailed management to managers.

While also stating their support for the ingoing process of system-wide coherence, Pakistan observed that the process of UN reform must "...remain sensitive to the fundamental principle of equality of sovereign states in the decision making process." On the Security Council the representative reaffirmed Pakistan's objection to the establishment of new permanent members. "The Security Council reform must enlarge the representation of all member states rather than expand the circle of the privileged," Pakistan concluded.

In his closing remarks, the President of the General Assembly, H.E. Srgjan Kerim thanked the delegates for their "insightful" contributions during the high-level debate. "The presence of almost a hundred heads of State and government as well as about 80 ministers for foreign affairs is a mark of the importance the world places on this unique Assembly," he said.

In noting the numerous challenges the world faces today, Mr. Kerim concluded that; "there is overall agreement that we could make faster progress on all these issues if our multilateral institutions better reflected contemporary realities, underlining the need for better progress on United Nations reform," he said, citing a need to make the Secretariat more effective and to reform the Security Council.

In total, 189 Member States addressed the high-level debate, along with two observers: the Holy See and Palestine. A total of 67 heads of State, 25 heads of government, four vice-presidents, 13 deputy ministers, 66 foreign ministers, two other ministers, four deputy ministers and eight chairs of delegation spoke.

**This update is meant to be a summary of some of the main ideas discussed during the meetings and does not represent a complete and official account of all positions expressed by Member States.*