



“Building Resilience through Hope – To Recover from COVID-19, Achieve Environmental Sustainability, Promote Human Rights and Revitalize International Cooperation”

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Introduction

Like many African indigenous cities, Ibadan show case diverse exoteric cultures in festivities and ceremonies. These exoteric cultures have helped her to maintain a sense of belonging and identity among the Yoruba cities. It has also assisted in connecting her past to the present and helping to decipher the contours of the socio-cultural diffusion of her existence. On the economic and religious landscape, it has produced clarity into a cultural realism of her religious cosmology. Ibadan as one of the Yoruba cities is a melting pot for various cultures within the Yoruba landscape. This is because the founders of present Ibadan were citizens of some other Yoruba towns and cities that surrounded it (Johnson, 1921; Falola, 2012)¹. Thus, there is reflection of





Introduction

From the topic that the organizers of this conference gave to me, it is clear that they have a concern for the role that the United Nations can and should play in our contemporary world. Undoubtedly as the sole universal international organization in our world, that is, one whose membership is open to all sovereign states which desire it, the United Nations is the most suitably placed inter-governmental organization to exercise positive and unbiased influence in the four core areas that the organizers have in the theme of the conference, and which forms the basis of this address, notably,

- global recovery from the destructive and disruptive political, socio-economic, structural impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic,
- achieving environmental sustainability
- human rights promotion, and
- revitalization of international cooperation.

A cursory look at the Charter of the United Nations will show clearly that these are integral to the core responsibilities for the maintenance of international peace and security, most especially because they concern the whole world. I will endeavor, in the course of this address, to speak briefly to each of the above four issues.

There is hardly a more auspicious period in world history than now for a critical and dispassionate examination and analysis of the role, performance, challenges, shortcomings, limitations, successes and failures, and future of the United Nations Organization in the core task which it was established to undertake. The recent land, air and sea invasion of Ukraine by Russia that has become the ongoing full-scale war, calls into question the ability of the UN in the onerous task of maintaining international peace and security. This is the first international war in Europe since the end of the Second World War, with the scary possibility of it becoming a wider conflagration between nuclear armed Russia on the one side, and NATO countries also with their formidable array of national nuclear arsenals, on the other, with the rest of the world helplessly caught in the middle. Scholars of world politics are bound to raise questions as to the continued relevance of the United Nations Organization since it has failed to prevent this particular war.

Although this address is not about the Russia-Ukraine war, but it is a developing issue that cannot be ignored, for it requires global cooperation to prevent its escalation and bring it to quick termination and save humanity from avoidable nuclear Armageddon. It is in this



regard that revitalization of international cooperation is, to my mind, both necessary and inevitable, in fact, an irreducible minimum condition for the world, the community of sovereign nation-states, to address and overcome some of today's contemporary challenges and threats. This is also against the backdrop of the commonality of those challenges. In our world today, some of the critical challenges facing nation-states are common to them all, and not a single one can be resolved effectively except through international cooperation, except nations agree to work together in concert and with collective resolve. Today, increasing epidemic diseases such as HIV/AIDS, Ebola, Corona Virus; transnational terrorism and insurgencies; state failure and collapse; climate change and its effects, are some of the challenges confronting all nations of the world, and which only concerted actions can address.

It is regrettable, however, that the great powers, which are supposed to be the guardians of international order, are also the principal culprits when it comes to nonconformity with civilized international rules and regulations, especially on the non-use of force. The United States in particular has always claimed the right to act unilaterally and employ brute military force to achieve its national objectives in gross violation of Article 2(3 and 4) of the UN Charter that enjoins all member states to settle international disputes amicably and to avoid the use of force against the territorial integrity and political independence of other countries. Along with its NATO allies, the US egregiously violated this when it bombed and destroyed Libya to effect a regime change in an African member state of the United Nations. Russia, another permanent member of the Security Council also invaded and annexed Crimea in 2014, and is currently embroiled in another war with neighbouring Ukraine. Driven by blind selfish national interests, the great powers have sought to turn the platform of the United Nations Security Council into an avenue for grandstanding and playing the politics of embarrassment against one another rather than a platform for seriously addressing threats to international peace and security.

But let me confine myself to the theme of the conference and briefly address the four identified sub-themes.

(a) Recovery from Covid-19 Pandemic

The outbreak of the corona virus and its rapid spread across the globe shocked the whole world into panic mode. And the first reaction of most governments was to shut land, air and sea borders against travelers from other states to curb the spread of the virus. Travel restrictions and border closures were first imposed in the European Union and North America, and emulated by other countries in the Global South as well, and the race to develop and produce vaccines



began in earnest in the advanced industrial nations which rapidly applied extreme nationalistic and nativist policies and practices to address the problem in their own countries, leaving the rest of the world to fend for themselves. It took the rapid spread and constant mutation of the virus without respect for national border for the world to realize the futility of nativism in the face of what is a global pandemic that only collective effort can address to everyone's advantage.

In the course of the growing pandemic, and the actions that governments initially took, the global economy took considerable beating, resulting in negative growth, massive job losses due to cuts, massive disruption in global supply chains, rise in poverty levels due to loss in GDP with the developed economies losing billions of dollars in revenue, economic recession in many countries, etc. According to the OECD, the pandemic poses by far the greatest threat to global economy since the great recession of 2008-2009. Though there has been a gradual rebound, the negative impact of Covid-19 on developing countries remain more severe. The unevenness in global economic recovery implies that many countries continue to require external assistance for effective mitigation.

But I must emphasize that, as severe as it has been on international economy, it is not only global economy that is severely impacted, governance was also affected. A number of governments seized on the pandemic to institute draconian authoritarian measures that enable autocrats to impound more powers to themselves and restrict peoples' rights and freedoms. Democratic backsliding or democratic recession has been one of its impacts in some European, Asian and African countries.

But rather than actively cooperating with the UN at the initial stages of the covid-19 pandemic, the great powers simply relapsed into extreme nativism, vaccine hoarding, and travel restrictions, virtually abandoning the less developed nations to fend for themselves, as if these measures would protect them against the rampaging virus. The world of the 21st century call for international understanding and collaboration to address common challenges.

Mercifully, the reality of the inevitability of international cooperation is sinking in. For example, not only has COVAX initiated measures to make billions of doses of the various covid-19 vaccines available to developing countries, the World Health Organization has also recently given approval for six African countries ----- Nigeria, Egypt, Senegal, Kenya, South Africa and Tunisia ----- to receive the technology to produce mRNA vaccines on the continent.¹ This is in its efforts to assist low-and-middle income states to achieve vaccine equity. According to the Director-General of the World Health Organization, Tedros



Ghebreyesus, "... the best way to address health emergencies and reach universal health coverage is to significantly increase the capacity of all regions to manufacture the health products they need, with equitable access as their primary endpoint."²

(b) Achieving Environmental Sustainability

Concern for the protection of the earth's environment for sustainable living has gained momentum in recent decades. It has become a matter of concern to all across the globe that planet earth is the common heritage of mankind and that the need to protect it cannot be the responsibility of any one nation or group but that of the whole world and of all states acting together in concert. We have a common stake in environmental sustainability because the planet earth is the common heritage of humanity, and its resources must be held in trust for all mankind, i.e., both today's generation and future generations as well. This has been a cardinal principle that in developing ourselves today, the earth's environment must be utilized judiciously and sustainably with future generations in mind, today's generation must not be selfish in its behaviour. And this applies not only to our exploitation of the earth's rich resources but also in the manner that we must neither use nor exploit the environment in any destructive manner, for the sake of coming generations who have no other planet they can call their own. As someone famously said, there may be a "Plan B" but there is "No Planet B"!

Although the concept of the earth as the common heritage of mankind has been around for long, it gained greater popularity and currency at the first *UN Convention on the High Seas* (UNCLOS I, 1958) and the subsequent resolutions of the UN General Assembly covering the use of the seabed and ocean floor, subsequent UNCLOS II and UNCLOS III, as well as similar international conventions and treaties regarding the non-militarization of outer space, specifically banning emplacement of nuclear weapons in outer space. All these are intended to guarantee sustainable use of the earth's environment and its resources. And this also applies to the actions of governments within their national jurisdictions not to engage in or permit any detrimental utilization of the earth's environment and resources or in a way that might rob future generations of their right to decent and productive living, for it is the common heritage of humanity. In fact, all the 12 articles in the *UNESCO Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations* (November 12, 1997) build on the common heritage principle. Article IV of the Declaration states for the avoidance of doubts that:

the present generations have the responsibility to bequeath to future generations an Earth which will not one day be irreversibly damaged by human



activity. Each generation inheriting the earth temporarily should take care to use natural resources reasonably and ensure that life is not prejudiced by harmful modifications of the ecosystems and that scientific and technological progress in all fields does not harm life on Earth.

This therefore is the basis for environmental sustainability which can neither be left to chance nor to the whims of individual nations but rather to collective efforts. It is in this wise that the UN has organized series of international conferences on the environment and signed several treaties and protocols, the most recent being the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP-26 in Glasgow, Scotland in November 2021) which is the 26th of its type, following on the footsteps the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). During the 2021 Glasgow conference, a new and more comprehensive agreement for the mitigation of the negative effects of climate change was signed by all the 197 parties present. Among other wide-ranging provisions, COP-26 commits states to reduce the use of coal, restrict greenhouse gas emissions, provide financial aid to developing countries to enable them adapt more suitably to the impacts of climate change, etc.

The poor countries of the Global South are hit much harder by climate change. In Africa for example, rivers and lakes are drying up, and burgeoning desertification is destroying the livelihoods of millions of people who have depended on the resources of the rivers and lakes from time immemorial. Lake Chad has shrunk far beyond normal, causing mass migrations that now occasion violent conflict between nomadic herdsman and sedentary farmers in parts of Northern Nigeria. Without financial and technical assistance from the industrialized world, it is impossible for the nations so negatively impacted to mitigate the effects of climate change on their own. This is where the UN has a role to play by pressuring and ensuring that the developed nations that have made pledges of financial assistance to the developing nations for the mitigation of the adverse effects of climate change, climate adaptability through technological innovations neither default nor abandon those promises, nor turn such offers of financial assistance into profit-making business ventures at the expense and detriment of the poor nations, for to do so will ultimately defeat the core objective of reversing climate change to ensure the overall goal of environmental sustainability.

(c) Human Rights Promotion

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the General Assembly in Paris on December 10, 1948, (General Assembly Resolution 217 A), the United Nations has been in the



vanguard of human rights promotion and protection across the globe. According to the UN, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights “sets out, for the first time, fundamental human rights to be universally protected ... and is widely recognized as having inspired, and paved the way for, the adoption of more than seventy human rights treaties, applied today on a permanent basis at global and regional levels.”³ Today, all existing human rights treaties, conventions and protocols make reference in their preambles to the UDHR.

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that across the globe, fundamental human rights and basic freedoms have come under systematic assault in various forms and guises in recent decades, in spite of the fact that all member-states of the UN are bound by the provisions of the UDHR. This is increasingly so as the world witnesses gradual and systematic decline of democratic governance in many states across the globe. Gradual autocratization has replaced democratization, most especially in the countries of the Global South, where autocratic despots and presidents-for-life still hold sway, where elections have become mere routines to validate and sustain tyrants in power, where national constitutions are cynically manipulated to give autocrats unlimited powers and tenures without limit. In like manner, fundamental human rights is suffering serious rollback in Eastern Europe with the rise of authoritarian regimes and autocratic dictators that are generally incommensurate by such niceties. In the course of this, it is human rights that is first to come under the hammer; international human rights treaties to which nations have signed on are casually ignored; fundamental rights are grossly violated; and even constitutionally guaranteed basic freedoms and civic rights are whimsically trampled upon by dictators. This increasing democratic backsliding and outright reversals make the work of the UN more important today and into the future because unless these ugly developments are checked, the fate of human rights protection will hang in the balance as dictators may succeed in reversing the gains and advances that the world had recorded since the adoption of the UDHR in 1948.

What can and must the UN do in this regard? Strengthen and empower its various human rights organs and agencies to function adequately, and to promptly implement their recommendations. State members of the world body must exercise the requisite boldness to call recalcitrant or errant states to order for the sake of humanity. This is where the great powers themselves, especially the five permanent members of the Security Council, must demonstrate impartiality and leadership by example for others to follow. With advanced industrial states in the lead by demonstrating the moral courage, not only will it be easy for other states to follow and emulate them, but it would also be much easier to call errant states to order and to sanction them if need be. And this is more urgent against the



backdrop of creeping authoritarianism across the globe and the severe erosion of human rights protection. The requisite UN agencies charged with monitoring human rights observance must be empowered to function effectively, and their recommendations must be fully implemented. For if the UN fails in this regard, then the world might as well kiss respect for and protection of fundamental human rights and basic freedoms good bye.

(d) Revitalization of International Cooperation.

Since we have acknowledged that our contemporary world is confronted by certain challenges which are common, the need and rationale for collective action to address and overcome them cannot be over-emphasized. For example, the wide-ranging destructiveness of the First World War brought the realization that nations must necessarily find ways of acting in concert for the mitigation of needless international armed conflagrations, hence the formation of the League of Nations in 1919 as part of the Paris Peace settlements. Though it eventually failed, on account of its constitutional, political and institutional weaknesses and inadequacies, to prevent the outbreak of the more destructive Second World War, the establishment of the United Nations in 1945 was intended to overcome the identifiable limitations and shortcomings of the League. The UN Charter declares in its preamble "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" and the world has thus far been spared another global conflict, although a plethora of small wars, low-intensity conflicts, and regional conflagrations, have flared up, the most recent being the ongoing war in Ukraine.

But apart from war, the world can only more suitably and comprehensively address major challenges of domestic and transnational terrorism, insurgency, state failure and trans-border contagion, climate change and ecological disasters, mass migrations, etc by acting in concert. If anything, this more pungently underscores the necessity for the revitalization of international cooperation, states working together to do what can only be done collectively and where individual national efforts alone cannot do. And the United Nations remains the only truly universal platform where this can be done, although states occasionally also engage in grandstanding than act for global good. Nonetheless, revitalizing international cooperation must also be a function of the respect which all states, big and small, accord the UN. Its continued relevance will be questioned if the great powers continually subvert international rules of civilized conduct as others might begin to perceive logic in individual rather collective actions.

Concerning the ongoing war in Ukraine, the UN needs to demonstrate utmost neutrality to encourage a ceasefire that would facilitate



dialogue and eventual resolution of the conflict. Diplomacy must be accorded its rightful place, and this can only happen if the UN does not allow itself to be goaded into needless and unproductive one-sidedness by the Western powers whose ulterior intention is war-mongering by demonizing Vladimir Putin and denigrating his country's national security concerns. Unfortunately, the UN lost that neutrality as a honest broker when it convened an emergency session of the General Assembly where nations were made to denounce Russia rather than work for a honest resolution of the crisis.

Conclusion: The Importance of the UN for Contemporary World

I alluded in the opening paragraphs to the fact that the importance of the UN in our contemporary world cannot be over-emphasized. Today's world is a highly inter-connected and interdependent world of more than 200 sovereign states and self-governing territories and are collectively confronted with certain critical challenges which can only be suitably addressed by collective efforts of all states acting together in concert. I have mentioned some of the challenges of the contemporary world such as domestic instabilities and state failures, domestic insurgencies and transnational terrorism, climate change and its negative impacts, pandemics and other global health emergencies, and none of these challenges can be addressed or resolved by individual states, no matter how powerful, developed and advanced, largely because of their transnational nature and character. We have mentioned climate change and environmental sustainability as a global challenge, the promotion and protection of fundamental human rights and basic freedoms require collective action, mitigating the adverse consequences of Covid-19 pandemic requires collective actions as well. As the Director-General of the World Health Organization, a Specialized Agency of the United Nations, has made clear, no nation can singlehandedly vaccinate its way out of the pandemic. Experiences have shown beyond a shadow of doubt that no one is safe from Covid-19 until all are made safe from it, because the virus and its rapid mutations are no respecters of national boundaries or territorial sovereignty. The world faces other epidemic and pandemic diseases such as Ebola, HIV/AIDS, malaria, and others, all of which require the coordinating and supervisory role of the UN as the only truly universal body to address.

But if the necessary care is not exercised by all concerned, the UN risks gradual degeneration into irrelevance and obsolescence, not only by the selfish and unilateral actions of the great powers alone, but increasingly by large of numbers of other states in the Global South that feel severely marginalized in the high portals of decision-making such as the Security Council. As of today, the Security Council with five permanent members who wield the veto power over UN activities is skewed in favour of Europe and grossly disadvantages the developing



world. While Europe, a continent of about 40 states has three permanent members (UK, France and Russia), North America has one (USA), and Asia, where a third of global population resides, has only one (China).

Nearly eighty years since its founding, the structure of the UN continues to reflect the Cold War era power configuration. If this structure reflected the geopolitical and strategic realities at its formation when there were less than sixty independent states in the world, it is antiquated and unrealistic in the contemporary world of more than 200 states and territories. While Africa had only four independent states in 1945 (Ethiopia, Liberia, South Africa and Egypt), the continent today has fifty-five sovereign states, all of which, except Western Sahara, are members of the world body. It is patently unfair and inequitable that a continent with nearly a third of total UN membership has no permanent member in the Security Council! The same goes for Central and South America with no representation in the Council. Additionally, some countries that contribute more to the budget of the UN, such as Japan and Germany, are excluded from the Council while both the UK and France with less contributions remain in the Council.

It was on the recognition of the need to rectify all these inequities and make the UN more relevant to the modern world that then Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2003 set up the *High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change* to study the UN and make suitable recommendations for improvement that would ensure the continued relevance of the UN into the future. The Panel in its report which was submitted in December 2004 made wide-ranging recommendations for comprehensive reform of the world body that would secure its continued relevance to the whole world. Among others, it recommended the enlargement of the Security Council with more permanent members to accommodate previously neglected regions of the world but without giving them the veto, as well as some countries that qualify on their own by virtue of their contributions. In particular, the Panel recommended that two permanent slots without the veto be given to Africa. If implemented, the recommended reforms would assuage the feelings of hurt and marginalization that have become evident in the past six decades since large numbers of states became members.

It is however regrettable that those recommendations, including reform of the Security Council to accommodate more permanent members, have remained unattended to, largely because of the reluctance of the permanent members to share power and privilege with others. This lack of inclusivity may eventually vitiate the relevance of the UN in the eyes of other states who may embark on alternative measures. North Korea, for example, has ignored all UN entreaties



against its development of nuclear weapons which its regime perceives as an existential imperative.

In the absence of any other worthwhile alternative to the UN, the world faces the inevitable option of descending into chaos if the predilection of the great powers for independent unilateral military actions are unchecked by collective effort. Only by allowing the UN to perform its functions can humanity be saved from the destructiveness of war in the nuclear age.

I must not conclude this address without making some reference to the unfortunate and destructive war raging in Europe between Russia and Ukraine. The crisis which has led to this war has much deeper historical roots than time will permit me to dabble into here. But now that the crisis has snowballed into a shooting war, it is important to underscore the failure of the United Nations to avert the outbreak of the war. And I must point out that the weakness and failure of the world body was caused by the great powers which always prefer to act unilaterally in pursuit and or defence of their narrow national interests rather than allow the UN to function to save humanity collectively from the scourge of war. The United States of America, in particular, has been the biggest culprit when it comes to employing military power to undermine international order, flagrantly disdaining civilized rules of conduct by forcing regime change in different countries. The destruction of Libya by the US and its NATO allies is a recent example. It is regrettable that all the five permanent members of the UN Security Council are either directly or vicariously implicated in the current war in Ukraine, so they cannot, logically speaking, be objective in finding solutions to it. Only a respected politically neutral and honest broker can step in, and this is where the UN must assert itself to checkmate great power excesses so that diplomacy can be accorded the pride of place.

How can the UN be suitably positioned to be effective in the resolution of the ongoing war in Ukraine should be of importance to the participants at this conference. What must the world do via the instrumentality of the UN to ensure that the war in Ukraine does not become a Europe-wide conflagration and how can it be brought to speedy termination through skilful diplomacy must be of concern to this conference as well.

Appreciation

I want to wholeheartedly commend the organizers and hosts of this Model United Nations for giving me this unique opportunity and privilege to share my views with all of you on some important aspects of our contemporary world, to serve as a curtain-raiser for what I believe will be more intensive and in-depth discussions by all the



participants for the next few days. It is hoped that through your informed deliberations, credible recommendations for the future of our world and the invaluable role of the UN in it can be teased out. I thank you all for your kind attention.

¹ See all Nigerian daily newspapers of February 18, 2022.

²www.punch.com 18 February 2022.

³www.un.org.