

Courage in the Storm

Reaffirming the U.N. Charter in Today's Chaos

Address by Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.

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I speak to you tonight as a Canadian, which, almost by definition, means a friend of the United States. I believe that Canada must work with the U.S. in building peace not waging war. So I begin by recognizing that I have an immense problem with the U.S. administration and Israel's military attack on Iran. The whole world is feeling the effects of this illegal war now spinning out of control.

I also condemn Russia's criminal acts in waging war against Ukraine. The wanton killing of the people of Gaza is another example of the flouting of international law, which has become a distinguishing characteristic of our times.

All this represents the normalization of war as an instrument of foreign policy, which I wish to speak against. I wish to speak for a worldwide recommitment to adherence to the Charter of the United Nations as the indispensable instrument to obtain sustainable peace with social justice.

The long journey of humanity from the old culture of war to a new culture of peace, the central issue of our times, is now passing through a dark valley. The international system that we have known for the past 80 years has been ruptured. With international law shredded and authoritarianism spreading, we are tossed

about on raging seas. We need something solid to hold onto. We must cling to the United Nations Charter in these troubled times. The Charter not only provides an antidote to today's chaos, it is the basis for our hope for peace with social justice.

The assault on the core values of a culture of peace—non-violence, humanitarian law, respect and reconciliation—has been particularly egregious the past few years. It seems that “might makes right” has replaced the core values of the U.N. Charter.

The suffering of fellow human beings in the Ukraine and Gaza wars —and now the spreading of war in the Middle East — particularly testifies to the disregard for international humanitarian law by the major powers. The undermining of the U.N. Charter by the fractious permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, is a scandal of world proportions. Public opinion, notably in the West, has allowed this undermining to continue. We must look deeper than President Trump himself to keep hope alive for peace with social justice.

To keep our balance, we must take a long view and not be overwhelmed by the tragedies and confusion of the moment. Vision is required to maintain hope in the era of Trump. The historian Paul Kennedy has written about the decline of great nations of the past, which overspent on their militaries to the detriment of social needs. The real cost of America's outlandish spending on arms, long preceding Trump, is coming into view. The Global South is starting to rebel against mis-placed U.S. priorities. More nations are now calling for a strengthened multipolar world to offset a U.S.-dominated unipolar one. The emergence of new players on the international scene makes 2026 a very different landscape than 1989, when the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War magnified the importance of America.

The 1990s presented a golden moment to solidify a peace dividend after the Cold War. But it never happened. NATO began its fateful expansion. The military-

industrial complex, which President Eisenhower had first warned about, increased its dominance of American politics. Global military spending has increased every year for the past decade and now exceeds \$2.7 trillion a year.

Consider the contradiction the political order is foisting on us. The total amount of money countries annually spend on arms is now 750 times what they spend on the U.N. The NATO countries are planning to spend five percent of their GDP on defence while the U.N. is now cutting its budget and laying off staff. The arms trade thrives and people starve.

The world is now swirling around us. International humanitarian law is ignored as authoritarianism spreads. I am totally with U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's cry, "We have entered into an age of reckless disruption and relentless human suffering," and, he adds, leaders must decide now "what kind of world we choose to build together."

I dissent from the wild disproportion of what the world spends on arms and what it spends on development. I dissent from the anti-humanitarian policies of war for peace. I dissent from the perpetuation of poverty through the greed of the rich. I dissent from the despoliation of the planet by short-sighted industrialism. Most of all, I dissent from the fabric of lies spun by the proponents of nuclear weapons who would have us believe that these heinous instruments of mass murder make us safer.

Soon there will be no more living *hibakusha*. Who will carry forward their message that what happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki must never happen again? We must keep alive the conscience of the world protesting against such evil.

Already, the global conscience against nuclear weapons is weakening as arms control treaties break down and new nuclear arms races start up. Threats to use nuclear weapons are chilling reminders of how dangerous the world has become. We now envision future wars being run by artificial intelligence and even

pretend that a Golden Dome missile defence system will save us. We must stop making the same old mistakes as the world hurtles into a new era. The “wooden-headedness” of governments, as the historian Barbara Tuchman called it, must stop. Governments must cease pretending that military might and bombing innocent civilians will bring us security.

Where shall we turn to to get our bearings? With John F. Kennedy, I believe we can find peace not through a revolution in human nature but the gradual evolution of the institutions we have already built. The Charter of the United Nations is an anchor for us. So too are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty along with the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. These are more than documents. They are milestones in the human journey and we need to protect them no matter the vicious political storms attacking them.

They teach us that every human being has the sacred right to peace. In fact, on Dec. 19, 2016, the U.N. General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Right to Peace by a vote of 131 states in favour, 14 opposed and 19 abstentions. The Western states led the opposition. The opponents fear that formalization of the right to peace will pave the way for a future comprehensive law against warfare. That is exactly the point. As humanity continues to mature with each new generation, we must aim for a world without war. As our understanding of the universality of human rights grows, we will come to understand that the existence of weapons of mass destruction is absolutely incompatible with every human being’s right to live in peace.

Though we cannot — at least not yet in the moving history of the world — implement the right to peace, we can practice a culture of peace. A culture of peace revolves around non-violence, sustainable development, respect for all human rights, education, and the development of a strong public opinion. Our goal must

be nothing less than the mobilization of a strong public opinion to move governments to a common security agenda. Never doubt that this can be done.

The U.N. Summit of the Future, held in September 2024, produced a lengthy document, “The Pact for the Future,” which charts “a path to a brighter future for all of humanity.” It includes a pledge to move faster towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement commitments on climate change. The document calls for addressing the root causes of conflicts and accelerating commitments on human rights, including women’s rights.

“The Pact for the Future” brings into sharp focus the need for a recommitment to international cooperation based on respect for international law. Over the years, the U.N. has produced a body of law of unprecedented proportions: one has only to look at the growth of human rights, the condemnation of nuclear weapons, and the protection of the planet from global warming to grasp the scale of U.N. activity.

However, the laws emanating from the U.N. are dependent on the willingness of the major states to accept them in order for them to be effected. When states do not agree with the findings of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the highest court in the world, they simply ignore them. Similarly, the International Criminal Court (ICC) cannot carry out prosecutions in countries that do not recognize its jurisdiction. Although humanity has definitely lifted itself up in the past hundred years, it has not reached the level of enforceable world law. So, we are left in the humbling intermediate condition in which the world in all its major aspects has become globalized but in which there is relatively little enforceable global law.

“The Pact for the Future” cannot by itself solve problems, let alone enforce solutions, but without at least a map to guide peoples forward to a safer world, humanity would be even more lost than it is in today’s conflicted atmosphere. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the U.N. in 1948, was at first

only a document, but combinations of like-minded governments and an active civil society breathed life into it; today, no one disputes that it has been a prime instrument in the elevation of how human beings treat one another.

I turn to the next generation to keep alive the dream of a nuclear weapons free world as the basis of common security. At first, the idea of the abolition of slavery was just a dream, but it happened. So did the dream of freedom from colonialism. And the dream of ending apartheid. All these evils were ended because enough people rose up and demanded governments end them. Aim high. Set the year 2045, the 100th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and also the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Charter of the United Nations as the year that the peoples of the world will be free of the spectre of nuclear weapons.

We *can* obtain a world that is human-centred and genuinely democratic, a world that builds and protects peace, equality, justice and development. We *can* obtain a world in which human security, as envisioned in the principles of the U.N. Charter, replaces armaments, violent conflict and wars. We *can* obtain a world in which everyone lives in a clean environment with a fair distribution of the earth's resources and international law protects human rights.

The politics of the past have brought us untold wars and suffering. Isn't it time to try something better? Isn't it time to bring our heads and hearts together to produce true human security? Isn't it time to raise the standards of civilization for the sake of survival? Spare me the charge that this is mere idealism. The agenda for survival is no longer a dream but a pragmatic demand of the human race.

