

Address upon receiving Honorary Doctorate from Comenius University

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Bratislava (Slovak Republic), 19 October 2015

Dobry den. Dakujem za mile a srdecne prijatie. [Good morning. Thank you very much for your warm and heartfelt welcome.]

I am deeply honoured to receive this Honorary Doctorate and Gold Medal from the oldest and largest university in the Slovak Republic.

This is a reflection of your esteem for the United Nations. I accept on behalf of its global staff. They are the UN's heart and soul, and I attribute all honours I receive to them.

When I last came here, in 2008, I was welcomed with bread and salt. I enjoyed this warm tradition.

This time, I went to a restaurant called Zbojnicka Koliba to eat halusky and drink hruskovicica. Maybe it was thanks to Janosik [a mythical folk hero] that I had such a good meal!

I have always been moved by this country's historic struggle to shape its destiny.

I well remember the famous picture taken in 1968 by Ladislav Bielik showing a tank pointed at a man with his shirt open. This very building is in the background.

At that time, many students were inspired by Alexander Dubcek. He was a visionary reformer.

Dubcek lived to see the Velvet Revolution which began, in part, right here in 1989.

Brave students staged protests that sparked national demonstrations and changed the course of history.

That courageous spirit lives on.

I have just come from a dynamic meeting with a group of Comenius students from the Karol Rybárik International Relations Institute. I was impressed with their engagement on the major challenges in our world.

We are facing grave threats.

Grinding poverty is causing immense suffering that shames our world of plenty.

Climate change is intensifying. Conflicts are eroding international law and fuelling violent extremism.

Against this wave of danger, there is a counter-current of hope. Three weeks ago, world leaders adopted Agenda 2030 – and a visionary set of Sustainable Development Goals to create a life of dignity for all.

If our marathon to achieve the SDGs were a bicycle race, Slovakia would win – you have Peter Sagan on your team!

Yesterday I visited the Tatra mountains. Global warming has played a role in the destruction of forests there.

We are aiming for a meaningful new agreement at the Climate Change Conference in Paris this December.

To protect our planet, governments need academia – along with the civil society, businesses and other partners. The challenge is clear: defend human rights, establish peace, preserve the earth and make it better for all people.

Comenius University can help by sharing lessons from this country's remarkable transition to democracy and an open-market economy.

I am especially grateful to Slovakia for advancing the UN's work on security sector reform.

Slovak troops are also proudly serving in the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus. And I benefit from a number of Slovak senior advisors, including Mr. Jan Kubiš, Head of the UN Mission in Iraq, and my Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Mr. Miroslav Jenca, who joins me here. I understand his daughter is a student at Comenius – I hope she passes all her exams!

The United Nations welcomes the Slovak Model United Nations conference here next month. I applaud the many excellent Model UN conferences being held in Slovakia. I myself once participated in a mock UN debate – so you never know where that might lead.

The Slovak Republic has only been a member of the United Nations since 1993, but Slovak individuals have contributed to our work since the founding.

I am particularly inspired by the late Ambassador Jan Papanek. He was born on October 24th – the day we now celebrate as United Nations Day. And he helped give birth to the United Nations by attending the San Francisco Conference where the Charter was negotiated.

He also helped people who fled dictatorship.

He founded the American Fund for Czechoslovak Refugees – which evolved to serve refugees from other continents.

This was not a new cause for Dr. Papanek. For years, he cared about people who were driven from their homes. After the war, he visited refugees in Germany and told them that the world would help.

Tis spirit of solidarity – from a brave Slovak statesman and founder of the United Nations – is badly needed today.

True leaders understand this.

The United Nations was honoured last month to hear one of the great moral voices of our time: His Holiness Pope Francis. Pope Francis deplored attacks against people of all faiths.

The United Nations also stands for freedom of religion – and we firmly oppose all discrimination and attacks against religious minorities. These are crimes that must be punished.

Pope Francis declared that “real human beings take precedence over partisan interests.”

Political leaders and parties have a responsibility to promote respect across society.

I welcome the calls by President Kiska for Slovakia to respect the “European values of solidarity, humanity and hospitality” toward refugees.

I appreciate the Government’s commitment under the leadership of Prime Minister Fico.

National officials who take a brave stance can change public opinion.

The current migration and refugee challenges in Europe demand resolve and generosity.

Slovakia can understand these challenges from the viewpoint of its large diaspora.

Some who left faced hateful discrimination in their new lands.

I understand that refugees can raise logistical, political and cultural issues. Our responses need to be guided by human rights, law and solidarity.

People fleeing political oppression, grinding poverty and raging conflict need more than passive tolerance; they need protection and support.

They also deserve lasting solutions.

That is why we are working to resolve conflicts.

Mr. Kubiš has been part of this effort through his diplomacy in Iraq and, before that, Afghanistan.

The many people arriving in Europe now are seeking what all people want: a safe, stable and prosperous future. Many have survived terrible ordeals at the hands of traffickers and other criminals.

Later today, I will visit Gabčíkovo, where Slovak authorities are helping by housing asylum-seekers for the Austrian Government. I will go to show my solidarity.

I feel for the arrivals – as Secretary-General of the United Nations and as a person who remembers running from my own home during war.

When I was just a boy, Communist aggression from the north set Korea on fire. We were saved by United Nations forces from 21 countries.

Today, the United Nations continues to help struggling people – while working to address root causes like insecurity, poverty and discrimination.

From here, I will visit this University's Library. I am looking forward to seeing Basagic's Collection of Islamic Manuscripts. These very rare and valuable documents show the development of Islamic civilization over more than a thousand years. The fact that they are treasured here shows this University's respect for the importance of Islam in history.

Centuries ago, Johan Amos Comenius was what we call today a global citizen. He was a pioneer in making education accessible – including for women.

Comenius famously declared that, “We are all citizens of one world, we are all of one blood... we are all equally human.”

This is the founding premise of the United Nations, and our guiding philosophy.

I count on this impressive university community, especially its promising students, to join the United Nations as it strengthens our bonds with Slovakia to forge a better world for all.

Thank you.