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Remarks by the
Honourable Monique Landry,
Minister for External
Relations, at the 31st Plenary
Assembly of the World
Federation of United Nations
Associations

OTTAWA

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On behalf of the Government of Canada, I wish to welcome you to Ottawa on this occasion, and to wish you well in your deliberations. Organizations such as yours play an invaluable role in reinforcing public understanding of the United Nations and public commitment to its goals. That commitment in turn reinforces the political will of governments to participate constructively as members of the United Nations. I hope your meeting here in Ottawa will be a successful one, and also an enjoyable one for each of you personally.

We are proud that the United Nations Association in Canada was a founding member of the World Federation and that it has the honour this year of hosting the Plenary Assembly. Its promotional activities vis-à-vis the Canadian public and its quiet but persistent support of United Nations objectives vis-à-vis the Canadian Government have made it a most effective interlocuteur in many fields of multilateral policy-making. We congratulate the UN Association in Canada on achieving this degree of success.

You have chosen to focus on three subjects at this Assembly: peace, development and human rights. Each of them is a complex subject based on simple principles of humanity and justice to which Canada is unquestionably committed. The three subjects are united under the theme: "the U.N. system at work". Let me refer very briefly to each of them, before returning to the umbrella theme.

The first subject is peace. Participants at this Assembly will be aware of Canada's commitment to international peace and security. In 1956, Canada's Foreign Minister (and later Prime Minister) Lester Pearson, was the key figure in the creation of the first U.N. peacekeeping force to separate the belligerents at the end of the Suez war. We have participated in most peacekeeping operations since, and are currently active in four such operations in the Middle East and Cyprus. Canada is also energetically pursuing arms control measures in the various international forums in which we have a seat. We have also demonstrated a keen interest in those negotiations at which we are not directly represented. We believe that arms control proposals must be practical and responsive to the security concerns of both sides if they are to be useful. We have concentrated in particular on advancing the techniques of verification as an essential confidence building measure.

The United Nations is occasionally criticized for its inability to bring about disarmament or to end particular regional conflicts. But these expectations are unreasonably high. The achievement of peace and the international rule of

law is no easy objective. Yet the United Nations - with its many forums for dialogue - offers a milieu in which ideological opposites can speak to each other, however obliquely, and contribute to the reduction of tension. In the field of peace and security the achievement of the U.N. is no less real because it must be measured in negatives: there has been no global war in 42 years, and there has been constant pressure to contain and foreshorten regional conflicts wherever they arose.

The second of the three is development. I hardly need outline our national commitment to international development a group such as yourselves. audience. I will only say that our commitment includes significant contributions of resources - both human and otherwise - to the development programmes of the United Nations. The value of these programmes is by and large unchallenged, and the U.N. has earned enormous and well-deserved credit for its development efforts. The only serious criticism which might be levelled would be that duplication within the system continues to exist, but this is a management issue which I will address at greater length shortly.

Which brings us to the third subject, human rights. Concern for human rights remains a cornerstone of Canadian foreign policy. A Special Joint Parliamentary Committee on Canada's International Relations expressed the view last year that "the promotion of human rights is a vital and natural expression not only of Canadian values but also of universal values to which all governments, like individuals, are subject." The United Nations' record in this field can best be characterized as uneven. Special rapporteurs have been appointed in a few important or prominent cases. The fact-finding and conciliation processes of the organization have been reinforced. But many human rights violations have been allowed to pass unnoticed. Efforts to address them have foundered on the shoals of political double standards or against the cliffs of national sovereignty. Canada would like to see greater progress in this area and will be working hard to this end.

But let me return to the umbrella theme to your discussions: the United Nations at work. In recent years, harsh criticism of the United Nations - both in the General Assembly and in the Specialized Agencies - produced what the Secretary General chose to describe as a crisis of multilateralism. The implication was that the United Nations system did not work. Fortunately, most member states believe that the U.N. can be effective and therefore remains essential, if sorely in need of self-examination and renewal.

That renewal can be considered at three levels: at the superficial level of managing the crisis and correcting its immediate causes; at the deeper level of diagnosing the problem and seeking more permanent solutions; and at the level of

anticipating our future needs for global government and the corresponding transformation of the United Nations to meet those needs.

Last September, Canada observed a sad contradiction at the opening of the General Assembly. We stated that the United Nations was becoming more necessary and less effective. The United Nations faced a major financial crisis and was beset by myriad economic, social and political problems which it seemed to have little chance of solving. The urgency of the financial crisis convinced Canada, along with many other countries, to concentrate first on cost cutting and the avoidance of bankruptcy. We were also very active in the search for consensus on the much needed reform package.

Has the situation changed? Eleven months later the United Nations continues to face serious financial difficulties, and is still beset by problems it is hard-pressed to handle. But change there has been.

Under the wise and capable leadership of the Assembly's President, His Excellency Mr H. R. Choudhury, Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, and with the advice of a number of high-level experts from different regions of our world, the General Assembly slowly pulled itself towards a consensus agreement on administrative and budgetary reform. This was not just agreement on how to reform. It represented a new step forward in multilateral cooperation because it was an agreement that reform was indeed necessary. It therefore represented an exercise of considerable political will for those many countries which were hesitant or fearful of how the proposed changes might affect the U.N. programmes they most valued.

Another major exercise aimed at organizational reform within the broader U.N. family was recently started in the context of ECOSOC. Canada hopes that this thorough examination of the U.N. structure will result in a strengthening of the system as a whole.

Canada played a leading role on U.N. reform last year, partly out of a perception that we have a clear need for a strong and workable multilateral system, and partly out of a genuine desire to see the United Nations fulfil its political, economic and social mandate.

Although the so-called crisis of multilateralism is not over, we have seen in action the political will which is needed to overcome it. Only the most pessimistic can now claim that the U.N. and its membership are incapable of responding to criticism and to the challenge of a crisis.

The accent is now on implementation. I hope, Foreign Minister Choudhury, that you will make a point of emphasizing the importance of implementing the reforms we all agreed on, when you hand over the Presidency to your successor next month.

In the hope of giving further, and much needed, impetus to the reform effort, Canada has submitted to the U.N. and its Specialized Agencies a complex and detailed set of administrative budgetary proposals. Together, these proposals represent a model administrative system which, if adopted, would enable U.N. agencies to perform both more efficiently and more effectively. A more rational determination of priorities and greater budgetary transparency would permit improved control over programme implementation and better value-for-money. We hope that detailed discussions of these proposals with U.N. and member country officials this autumn will lead to the formulation of implementation plans tailored to specific agencies.

But there is a level of analysis few of us have considered yet, particularly in the sober halls of the United Nations building itself. Perhaps most of us are too hesitant to step into the role of futurologist. But change is so rapid in this half of the 20th century that the future will be here sooner than we can imagine. Who is more qualified than a non-governmental body devoted to the principles of the United Nations to speculate on, and to plan for, the next generation of multilateral organizations?

The Canadian philosopher, Marshall McLuhan, sought to illustrate the interdependence of people and the apparent shrinking of distances in our modern technological world, by referring to the global village. Since our population passed the five billion mark this summer, it may be more appropriate to refer to the global city, but the point remains the same. More and more we are living in each others back yard, breathing each others air and sharing the same diminishing natural resources. As both a Minister and a Member of Parliament, I am constantly aware that it is becoming difficult to adopt any measure of social or economic policy within the confines of one's own national frontier, which does not affect in some way the interests of one or more other countries.

There is no longer any question of whether or not there will be global governance. The question is how it will come into being. The United Nations was born from the cataclysm of global warfare, and was designed to serve an international system based on sovereign nation states. But our world is changing rapidly, and the concept of the nation state may no longer be sufficient to channel the energies and satisfy the aspirations of our five billion people.

Governments and international secretariats are so preoccupied with the crisis of the moment - indeed the many crises of the moment - that they rarely have the time or patience for future-oriented analysis. Moreover, the idea that the people of this world could deal with each other without reference to their nation states, or the idea of a transformation of the United Nations to operate on any other basis than the principle of one-nation-one-vote, seem beyond the reach of the present generation. But let us be reminded that the decolonization process of the 1950s and 1960s was a quite sudden reversal of a strong and widely held belief that such changes would take many generations.

We have seen over the past year that the United Nations is capable of taking some basic steps in its own administrative and budgetary reform. Is it capable, and are we - its members, capable of transforming the organization to better suit the needs of the global city of the next century? I do not for a moment believe that our present U.N. is doomed, like its predecessor the League of Nations, gradually to outlive its usefulness. But surely there is scope and a need for further evolution. It should be the national societies, such as those which comprise this World Federation, that ought to examine such issues and propose new ways of improving the organization we are dedicated to upholding, and upon which we are depending to assure the future well-being of humanity.