

Menace of Terrorism requires Global Response, increased UN role

Kofi Annan

[Following is the statement of Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the 20 January Security Council ministerial meeting on terrorism]

The Security Council, in today's meeting, is showing the firm will of the international community to address the scourge of terrorism. Your presence here at ministerial level is a sign of the importance that the world attaches to dealing effectively with this global threat.

Terrorism is a menace that requires a global response. Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 on New York and Washington, the world has focused unprecedented attention on terrorism and on the means of countering it. The tragic loss of life in terrorist attacks such as those in Moscow, Bali and Mombasa is a dramatic reminder that success in countering this threat remains elusive. Despite enhanced attention and more concerted action, the problem of terrorism will require sustained long-term action if it is to be addressed successfully.

The United Nations must play an increasing role in dissuading would-be perpetrators of terror by setting effective international norms, and issuing a clear message on the unacceptability of acts of violence targeting civilians.

The United Nations must also do whatever it can to deny terrorists the opportunity to commit their appalling crimes. The Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee will continue to have a key role to play in this area, as will our common efforts to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Greater efforts are needed to ensure universality, verification and full implementation of the key treaties relating to weapons of mass destruction, to tighten national export controls over items needed to produce them, and to criminalize the acquisition or use of such weapons by non-State groups.

Because of its responsibility in ensuring the implementation of international anti-terrorism conventions and standards, the Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee will continue to be at the centre of global efforts to fight terrorism.

Finally, it will be necessary to sustain broad international cooperation by clearly articulating the work of various international, regional, and subregional organizations in this effort. In this regard, I would like to welcome the Counter-Terrorism Committee's initiative to hold a meeting with international, regional and subregional organizations in early March of this year. I trust that this meeting will constitute an important step towards the goal of sustained international cooperation in counter-terrorism. I am also proposing that counter-terrorism be a major agenda item at the meeting I will convene with regional organizations later this year.

We face a grave and growing threat from international terrorism. Terrorism is a global scourge with global effects; its methods are murder and mayhem, but its consequences affect every aspect of the United Nations agenda — from development to peace to human rights and the rule of law.

The United Nations has an indispensable role to play in providing the legal and organizational framework within which the international campaign against terrorism can unfold. But we must never lose sight of the fact that any sacrifice of freedom or the rule of law within States — or any generation of new tensions between States in the name of anti-terrorism — is to hand the terrorists a victory that no act of theirs alone could possibly bring.

Even as many are rightly praising the unity and the resolve of the international community in this crucial struggle, important and urgent questions are being asked about what might be called the “collateral damage” of the war of terrorism — damage to the presumption of innocence, to precious human rights, to the rule of law, and to the very fabric of democratic governance.

Domestically, the danger is that in pursuit of security, we end up sacrificing crucial liberties, thereby weakening our common security, not strengthening it — and thereby corroding the vessel of democratic government from within. Whether the question involves the treatment of minorities here in the West, or the rights of migrants and asylum seekers, or the presumption of innocence or the right to due process under the law — vigilance must be exercised by all thoughtful citizens to ensure that entire groups in our societies are not tarred with one broad brush and punished for the reprehensible behaviour of a few.

Internationally, we are seeing an increasing use of what I call the “T-word” — terrorism — to demonize political opponents, to throttle freedom of speech and the press, and to delegitimize legitimate political grievances. We are seeing too many cases where States living in tension with their neighbours make opportunistic use of the fight against terrorism to threaten or justify new military action on long-running disputes. Similarly, States fighting various forms of unrest or insurgency are finding it tempting to abandon the slow, difficult, but sometimes necessary processes of political negotiation for the deceptively easy option of military action.

Just as terrorism must never be excused, so must genuine grievances never be ignored. True, it tarnishes a cause when a few wicked men commit murder in its name. But, it does not make it any less urgent that the cause be addressed, the grievance heard, and the wrong put right. Otherwise, we risk losing the contest for the hearts and minds of much of mankind.

We must act with determination to address, indeed solve, the political disputes and long-standing conflicts which underlie, fuel, and generate support for terrorism. To do so is not to reward terrorism or its perpetrators; it is to diminish their ability to find refuge or recruits, in any cause, any country.

In its efforts to address the problem of terrorism, the United Nations and its Members must not lose sight of the broader international agenda. While there is an urgent and compelling need to prevent acts of terror, there is a no less compelling need to pursue the goals enshrined in the United Nations Charter. To the extent that the Organization succeeds in fighting poverty,

injustice, suffering and war, it is also likely to help end the conditions that serve as justification for those who would commit acts of terror.

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