

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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**REMARKS AT THE CEREMONY MARKING THE 600TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF LEUVEN**

Leuven, 21 March 2025

[as delivered]

Dear Rector Magnificus, Chère Madame la Rectrice,

Allow me to address you with the expression that in my country is reserved for the rectors of the university of the Coimbra, your sister university: Magnificus rectorus, magnificent rectors.

Thank you for your warm welcome, your very kind words and this significant honour.

I am proud to accept it on behalf of the United Nations and remembering the women and men of the UN all over the world.

You will find them working everywhere and around the clock.

Building and keeping peace.

Delivering lifesaving relief in the most desperate places on earth.

Fighting poverty and standing up for the marginalized.

Advancing human rights and the rule of law.

And striving to realize the universal values that express the very best of the human spirit.

By bestowing this honour at this consequential time, you are sending a clear message.

A message of support for the noble mission of the United Nations —a message of solidarity to all those working to make it real – and a message of inspiration for us to keep up the fight.

On behalf of the United Nations — thank you.

Distinguished Guests, Dear Students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

You honour the United Nations as we celebrate a remarkable milestone:

The 600th anniversary of the University of Leuven, one of the world's oldest and most prestigious institutions of higher learning, today represented by the two universities that are together in this beautiful ceremony.

Six centuries ago, scholars lit a flame of knowledge.

Generation after generation have kept this flame alive.

Through times of turmoil and triumph.

In war and in peace.

From the Renaissance to the information age.

It is here at Leuven that Erasmus refined his humanist thought, teaching the world to see learning as a path to compassion and understanding.

It was here that Mercator mastered cartography, revolutionizing navigation and the way we see our world — opening new horizons across continents.

It was here that future Prime Minister and statesman August Beernaert began his intellectual journey that led to his bold vision of peace through arbitration, which was recognized with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1909.

It was here that a young Georges Lemaître gazed at the stars and proposed what became the Big Bang theory — forever reshaping humanity's understanding of the universe itself.

And it was here that Dominique Pire, a humble Dominican friar, developed humanitarian principles that would earn him the Nobel Peace Prize for working with refugees and bringing hope to the forgotten.

All of you are keeping this flame alive in the 21st century.

Your scholars have helped lead the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change — and the need for urgent climate action.

Your universities played a pivotal role in launching the Global University Academy — supporting higher education for refugees worldwide.

The Leuven Institute for Artificial Intelligence fosters knowledge-sharing and international partnerships on AI.

Your startup incubators and technology transfer efforts transform innovative research into tangible benefits for humanity.

And you are opening new doors to equality and justice through your Gender Equality Plan, and by actively participating in initiatives like the Belgian Women in Science Network to increase the number of female students and staff in science, technology, engineering and math.

This joint celebration — bringing together KU Leuven and UC Louvain — is yet another example of your spirit of common purpose and renewed partnership...

One that shines a light towards a better, more equal future for all.

Excellencies, dear friends,

We need that light more than ever.

I am here today to deliver a simple and stark message:

Multilateralism matters.

But it is under attack like never before.

We can and must overcome this threat together.

Now is the time.

Your 600th anniversary coincides with a moment of reflection for the United Nations.

2025 marks our 80th anniversary as an organization and as the epicenter of multilateralism.

Our founding Charter embodies the world's conviction that by working together and adhering to shared principles and values, we can solve global problems.

Standing here in Europe, we know this same commitment to multilateralism is the beating heart of your own European union.

At home and around the world, Belgium and the European Union champion international cooperation, democracy, human rights and global solidarity.

Over the decades, Belgium has brought to life its motto of “unity makes strength” — contributing troops to UN peacekeeping missions, advancing peacebuilding and supporting lifesaving relief around the world.

Today, the European ideal stands as a powerful reminder of our shared responsibility to the world's most vulnerable people, and proof that isolationism is an illusion, never a solution.

A strong and united Europe is not just essential for the continent.

It is a fundamental pillar of a strong and effective United Nations.

Around the globe, the European Union and the United Nations work hand-in-hand:

Providing humanitarian aid to those in desperate need.

Building peace in fragile states and strengthening democratic institutions.

Defending human rights and dignity.

Supporting sustainable development and climate action.

And putting the spotlight on ending the scourge of domestic violence.

But these and other investments in international cooperation are under threat.

Deadly conflicts are multiplying and deepening, exacting a devastating human toll.

And a contagion of impunity is taking hold.

Poverty, hunger and inequalities are growing — while the wealth of a handful of men eclipses that of half of humanity.

The climate crisis is raging.

Vulnerable countries are often locked out of decision-making rooms.

Technology is outpacing our ability to protect people's safety, rights and dignity.

We see a dangerous rollback of fundamental freedoms.

Women's rights are under attack.

Minorities, refugees and migrants are demonized.

The voices of nationalism and isolationism are growing louder with a dangerous resurgence of strongarm politics.

And donors are dramatically scaling-back humanitarian and development support — while defense budgets soar.

It would be the cruelest of ironies for the poor to be made to pay for the weapons of the rich.

Last week, I was in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh during the holy month of Ramadan on a mission of solidarity with Rohingya refugees, and with the Bangladeshi communities that so generously host them.

The entire refugee population depends on humanitarian aid.

But with looming cuts, Cox's Bazar is fast-becoming ground zero of the funding crisis, with money for basic essentials like food, running out.

And I am hopeful that what we are doing now with several donor countries will help us overcome this tragic situation, because without a reversal of these cuts in Cox's Bazar and beyond — people will suffer and people will die.

Dear friends,

As the darkness spreads, we risk losing sight of Europe's greatest gift to civilization — the Enlightenment.

Everywhere we look, the fruits of the Enlightenment are being challenged by the voices of irrationality, ignorance and isolationism.

Truth, science and knowledge are being questioned.

Expertise and experience have somehow become liabilities.

And the multilateral values that the United Nations embodies — collaboration, solidarity, united action and human rights — are being undone by mistrust and geopolitical divisions.

Excellencies, dear friends,

Anniversaries are about more than looking to the past.

At their best, they are about renewing for the future.

And renewal sometimes means asking hard questions.

Let's be clear: The UN was never meant to be stuck in time.

The world has changed in fundamental ways — most notably the rise in economic influence and political power across the Global South.

How, can we justify, today, a Security Council without permanent representation for Africa — home to one-quarter of humanity?

How can we accept an unfair and dysfunctional global financial architecture that inadequately supports developing countries in their hour of need?

How can we passively accept that the great promise of Artificial Intelligence might be won at the expense of handing over our humanity to algorithms?

Renewal is the driving force of the Pact for the Future, agreed at the United Nations in September.

And multilateralism must be the engine of this renewal.

We need all countries working together — in solidarity — as we tackle the challenges facing our world.

In this spirit of renewal through multilateralism, I want to outline four areas where we can overcome today's threats by standing as one and forging common solutions.

First — we must find common solutions for peace in our fragmented world.

Around the world, peace is in short supply.

Look no further than Russia's invasion of Ukraine — an open wound in Europe.

This brutal war is now in its fourth year and has claimed thousands of lives, displaced millions — including many who have found shelter here in Belgium — and challenged the very foundations of European security and international order.

It is time for a just and lasting peace. But a just peace means that it must be based on the UN Charter, international law and UN resolutions, including the respect for territorial integrity.

In Gaza, since the horrific terror attacks by Hamas on October 7, the ensuing Israeli military operations have unleashed an unprecedented level of death and destruction.

I am outraged at this week's Israeli attacks in Gaza, which killed hundreds of people.

I was deeply saddened and shocked to learn of the death of one of our UN staff members — and the wounding of five other UN personnel — when two UN guesthouses in Deir al Balah were hit in strikes.

And appallingly another 5 UNRWA humanitarian workers were also killed this week, bringing the death toll to 284.

The ceasefire had finally allowed some measure of relief to ease the horrendous suffering of Palestinians in Gaza — and relief to Israeli families finally welcoming home hostages after over a year of anguish and desperation.

All of that has now been shattered.

Escalation is not the answer.

There is no military solution to this conflict.

I strongly appeal for the ceasefire to be restored, for unimpeded humanitarian assistance to be reestablished and for the remaining hostages to be released immediately and unconditionally.

Beyond ending this terrible war, we must lay the foundations for lasting peace — through immediate and irreversible steps towards a two-State solution — with Israel and Palestine living side-by-side in peace and security, in line with international law and relevant UN resolutions, with Jerusalem as the capital of both states.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo — a country whose tragic history resonates so strongly here in Belgium — renewed fighting, fueled by external interference and armed militias, has devastated communities and plunged the region into a deeper crisis, naturally aggravated by the presence of Rwandan troops, violating the territorial integrity of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In Sudan, bloodshed, displacement and famine are engulfing the country.

The warring parties must take immediate action to protect civilians, uphold human rights, cease hostilities and forge peace.

And domestic and international human rights monitoring and investigation mechanisms must be permitted to document what is happening on the ground.

Beyond these and other conflicts, we need to reform the global security architecture.

Drawing from proposals included in the New Agenda for Peace that we developed, the Pact for the Future calls for strengthening the machinery of peace by prioritizing the tools of prevention, mediation and peacebuilding.

The changing nature of conflict calls for a review of our global peace operations;

Enhancing coordination with regional organizations;

And the Pact includes also the first multilateral agreement on nuclear disarmament in more than a decade, even if we are still very far from a world free of nuclear weapons.

Dear friends,

Second — we can overcome threats to multilateralism by finding common solutions to reduce inequalities and ensure financial justice for all.

The Pact includes a call for a massive Stimulus to help countries invest in the Sustainable Development Goals.

It also urges bold reforms of the international financial architecture, including expanding the voice and representation of developing countries in institutions.

We must also substantially increase the lending capacity of Multilateral Development Banks to make them bigger, bolder and better.

And we must review the debt architecture to stop debt from bleeding countries dry.

No country should have to choose between servicing their debt and serving their people.

Our global economy also needs open, predictable and inclusive trade to spur broad-based prosperity and help developing countries to better link to global markets and supply chains.

The Pact also reminds us of a basic truth: societies can only thrive when all women and girls enjoy their full rights.

Investing in their education, economic empowerment, and social protection is not only fair — it is essential for a better future for all.

Third — we can strengthen multilateralism for the future by finding common solutions for climate action before it is too late.

The climate crisis is costing lives, livelihoods, and billions in damages.

Record heatwaves scorch continents.

2024 was the hottest year — in the hottest decade in history.

Relentless storms ravage communities.

Rising seas threaten coastlines — including here.

And those least responsible are bearing the heaviest burden.

If we are to limit temperature rise to 1.5 degrees — essential to avoid the worst of climate catastrophe — the science is clear:

Global emissions must peak this year and rapidly decline afterwards.

And we must recognize this challenge for what it is: a moment of enormous opportunity.

The benefits of the clean energy transition are clear.

Renewables renew economies.

They boost growth, lower energy bills, and help us all breathe easier with cleaner air.

This year — in advance of the UN Climate Conference, or COP30, in Brazil — every country must submit new economy-wide national climate plans that align with the 1.5 degree limit and seize the benefits of clean energy.

I am working closely with President Lula of Brazil to drive action by the biggest emitters.

The United Nations is also helping nearly 100 developing countries to prepare their national climate action plans.

And we will convene a special event to take stock of the plans of all countries, push for action to keep 1.5 within reach, and deliver climate justice.

I urge Europe to keep leading the way.

To set strong and ambitious emission reduction targets.

And to put an end to the myth that fossil fuels are the future.

We must accelerate the renewables revolution which can lower emissions, boost energy security, create good jobs, and provide cheap and accessible power.

Throughout, we must continue supporting developing and vulnerable nations, by making good on long-standing promises and delivering on climate finance across the board.

Climate solidarity is a moral obligation — and a matter of survival for us all.

Fourth and finally — we can overcome threats to multilateralism by making sure technology upholds human rights and dignity for all.

The information age is unfolding at a dizzying scale and speed.

Artificial Intelligence holds great promise.

But today, those benefits remain concentrated in the hands of a privileged few.

And while some are racing ahead with record investments, most developing countries are left in the dark.

Without guardrails, AI risks deepening geopolitical divides and inequalities;

Enabling surveillance, amplifying disinformation, facilitating cyberattacks;

And even making life-and-death decisions.

Humans must always retain control — guided by international law, human rights and ethical principles.

Technology must serve humanity, not the other way around.

That is the spirit of the Global Digital Compact also adopted at the United Nations last year.

It calls for closing the digital divide, so all countries can benefit.

It includes the first universal agreement on AI governance to bring every country to the table.

It calls for an Independent International Scientific Panel on AI that promotes a common understanding of AI risks, benefits and capabilities.

It proposes initiating a Global Dialogue on AI Governance — within the United Nations — to ensure that all countries have a voice in shaping common governance standards that help uphold human rights and prevent misuse.

And it urges support for helping grow AI tools and skills in developing countries.

I will soon present a report on innovative voluntary financing models and capacity-building initiatives to help all countries harness AI as a force for good.

Excellencies, dear students,

These are all ways that we can overcome the clear and present dangers to multilateralism in our time.

I am convinced that we can do it.

Every generation faces moments of decisive choice.

Yet none has possessed our tools, knowledge, and global awareness.

Today, we are celebrating history.

But history is also unfolding before our eyes — and I urge you to be on the frontlines for human dignity.

Refuse indifference. Choose hope. Confront injustice. Defend truth.

And for that you can draw, being inspired by the values these universities represent.

Dear students, I ask you today to draw strength and inspiration from your universities' history.

Dear Rector Sels and Rector Smets,

I wish to conclude by reinforcing your opening words.

You recounted the powerful story of the University's library — destroyed in 1914, and again in 1940.

In the midst of two world wars — and the rubble of this very city — the global shock and outrage that followed the destruction of a library sent a clear and powerful message.

These were not only attacks on books and manuscripts.

These were attacks on history, science, reason, knowledge and art.

These were attacks on the very hallmarks of humanity.

These were attacks on our common soul.

Twice the forces of ignorance tried to extinguish Leuven's light of knowledge.

And twice the world answered Leuven's call — and helped you restore that light brighter than ever.

Because in the aftermath of these attacks, we saw other aspects of humanity's soul revealed and shining brightly.

We saw generosity, in countries providing funding to rebuild, and books to re-stock the library.

We saw the power of collaboration, in countries standing with Belgium and with Leuven to resurrect this library not once, but twice.

And yes, we saw humanity's hunger for the eternal values that have guided your universities for 600 years — and the United Nations for 80 years.

Generosity, solidarity, renewal.

This is more than just your story — it is humanity's story.

It shows that no matter the challenge, we can face down threats.

We can overcome obstacles.

We can build stronger than before.

And so, let us carry this legacy forward.

And let's keep building — together.

Happy 600th anniversary.

And I thank you. Dank u. Merci.