

**SIXTH COMMITTEE OF THE  
UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

**Closing of the Work of the Committee at its Fifty-fourth Session**

**Statement**

**by**

**Mr. Hans Corell  
Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs  
The Legal Counsel of the United Nations**

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Mr. Chairman,

The Sixth Committee is now approaching the end of its work during the present General Assembly. I would like to congratulate the members of the Committee and, in particular, you Mr. Chairman and the other members of the Bureau on a successful session.

Since this will be the last meeting of the Committee before the turn of the millennium, it may be time for a moment of reflection. I would, therefore, like to make some brief remarks on the work of the United Nations in the legal field and the need for the rule of law in international relations.

A couple of days ago, the General Assembly held a plenary meeting to mark the end of the United Nations Decade of International Law. I recall what was said in the many statements in that session. The common theme was renewed belief in international law and its vital role for the maintenance of international peace and security; development of friendly relations among States; and creating conditions for full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by all. The need for better use of existing international institutions and procedures to ensure compliance by States with international obligations was another common denominator.

I would also like to recall the message from the Secretary-General to the General Assembly read out before the commencement of the debate. Although not a lawyer, the Secretary-General has a great interest in and a strong commitment to international law. If you study his statements, the idea of respect for international law and the rule of law in international relations is a recurrent theme.

Present in the Sixth Committee today are many delegates who have participated in its work not only during the current session or during the United Nations Decade of International Law. I recognize members who have contributed to the Committee's work for a much longer period. Those most experienced represent a link to earlier generations of lawyers, all committed to our common cause: the codification of international law and the creation of an international legal order.

On this occasion, we can justly conclude that our efforts through the years have borne fruit. Remarkable advancements in the field of international law have been made under the auspices of the United Nations, not least during the Decade of International Law. We who are present here today will remember, in particular, our common effort during the Codification Conference in the summer of 1998 and the adoption of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. This achievement stands out as a landmark in the history of international law.

At the same time we must admit that the century that is now coming to its end, and regrettably also the decennium that coincided with the Decade of International Law, have seen unspeakable atrocities and unbearable human suffering. We must ask: Why is this, when so much good work and so much good spirit is put into the shaping of an international legal order? What does this mean for the prospects of mankind? Will we ever learn the lessons from the past, or are we doomed to repeat our mistakes?

Some time ago, I came across a poem by the Finnish-Swedish poet Arvid Mörne. The poem was published in 1935, four years before the outbreak of the Second World War. Its title is "A New World War". The translation from Swedish is my own.

A World War! Was that not an overstatement?  
 Alas! We do not derange the order of the world,  
 Who, predestined to destroy or be destroyed,  
 Inhabit for a while this little place, the Earth.

What does it matter that some day we move  
 In giant armies towards the twilight of the gods  
 And, when all is over, leave behind a cloud of smoke  
 And blotches on the surface of a globe?

Have we, who so misspent our precious gift of life  
 With our rolling drums and gaudy banners,  
 Have we filled a higher purpose in the Universe  
 Than the earthly grass upon the grave in which we rest?

Which carries greater weight, when with his world  
 Amongst the suns beyond the misty Milky Way

The Most High sits in judgement, eternal, mild and wise:  
A busy ant-hill's fate or that of Rome?

Mr. Chairman,

The comparison between an ant-hill and one of the most remarkable cultural treasures of the world, the Eternal City of Rome is, of course, meant to startle. On further reflection, you are left with an uneasy sensation. You try to put the thought aside, but the paradox keeps returning in your thoughts -- a striking reminder of man's littleness. Certainly, our purpose must be more than that of the busy ant. But whatever we believe this purpose to be, we simply cannot allow that it should be to destroy or be destroyed.

In the United Nations, peoples of the world have come together in a global effort to maintain peace and security, to codify and develop international law and to work for respect for this law -- in short, to achieve an international legal order. The promotion and encouragement of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion is expressly laid down in the Charter.

We should cherish and be grateful for our diversity, for this multiplicity. But we should also be grateful for something that we have in common, for something that we have achieved through a common outreach across these differences, for something that will constitute our heritage to coming generations: international law.

The ultimate goal of this law is to protect the human being -- to allow the individual to lead a dignified life during his or her while on earth.

But then, likewise, it is the responsibility of each and every one of us to protect this law and secure its development. To achieve this, we must all work together: States and their representatives, governmental and non-governmental organizations, the business community and the so-called civil society, all of us.

The question that presents itself is: What, then, do we do about those who deny the very existence of this law or who violate it when it suits their interests? Mr. Chairman, the only method that will work in the long term is to spread the knowledge about this law -- and I do not necessarily mean its

articles and paragraphs, but rather its principles and spirit -- to the millions that are the potential victims when international law is violated. This is a daunting task, but it has to be undertaken. If the knowledge about the purpose and contents of international law, or at least its principles and spirit, is spread throughout the world, then -- but I am afraid only then -- will we also be able to turn the poet's somber prophecy into a more hopeful prediction.

During its existence, the United Nations has made efforts to spread this knowledge, particularly in connection with the Decade of International Law. But, Mr. Chairman, seen in this wider perspective, the work towards our common goal has only just begun. To continue this work, systematically, indefatigably and with conviction, will be our challenge as we enter the new millennium.

Thank you Mr. Chairman!