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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FULL TEXT OF SPEECH BY PROF S JAYAKUMAR,  
MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF SINGAPORE, AT THE  
54TH UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, NEW YORK,  
FRIDAY 24 SEPTEMBER 1999

WILL THE UN SURVIVE IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

Mr President

  
1 First, let me convey my warmest congratulations on your election. As we enter the new millennium, the UN crosses a significant threshold and we need a seasoned hand to lead us. Your long experience with the UN, first as a freedom fighter, now as the Foreign Minister of Namibia, will stand us in good stead. I also thank His Excellency Mr Didier Opertti of Uruguay for the good work he did last year.

2 As fellow small states, Singapore would also like to take this opportunity to warmly welcome the three new members to the UN: Kiribati, Nauru and Tonga. We hope that they will also join the Forum of Small States (FOSS).

3 Mr President, I wish to pose this question "Will the UN survive in the 21st Century?". I have framed this question provocatively because I believe that the UN has not yet adequately come to grips with the central challenges of the

next phase of its development. Unless it does so, my question may not just be rhetorical.

4 To be sure, the UN has been seized with efforts at reform for several years. But what is required must go beyond modification of existing institutions or organisational structures. The issue is not just how to make the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Secretariat or other organs work more effectively, although that is important. But we cannot succeed if we neglect the broader context of such endeavours. The key question is whether the current UN is conceptually and constitutionally sound.

5 The simple but hard won lesson of this century's experiments with international organisations from the League of Nations to the United Nations, is that the UN must work within the framework of the state system. If the UN has worked better than, or has lasted longer than the League, it is because the UN has accommodated the state system rather than posed a direct threat to it. Its member states see the UN as an additional protective umbrella, not as a body that diminishes them.

6 The League's Covenant was based on different premises. It emphasised disarmament. It promoted collective security. It required states to submit disputes to arbitration and judicial settlement. By doing so, the League posed an explicit challenge to the rights of states. On the other hand, the UN can do nothing that its members do not expressly allow it to do. The UN Charter is clear and explicit that the UN is based on the principle of sovereign equality of all its members. It also stresses the concomitant principle of non-interference in internal affairs.

7 These premises are now under pressure. As the 20th Century draws to a close, the state system is on the verge of a major transformation. This will profoundly affect all members and the UN itself.

8 I do not predict the end of the nation state. The concept of sovereignty is undergoing profound modification. But it does not seem likely that the nation state will simply disappear. No viable alternative to organising international political life has yet emerged, no matter how inadequate or how ineffective the current form may have become. Radical proposals for restructuring the framework of the state system will inevitably invite disappointment.

9 The UN must therefore work within the existing framework, even as that framework is being transformed. Herein lies the subtlety and the difficulty of the new challenge.

10 Two forces are impelling change: the pressures of a truly integrated world economy and the end of the Cold War. Neither is adequately understood. Even less understood is their inter-play. This dialectic simultaneously impels an unprecedented degree of international cooperation and makes international cooperation more difficult to achieve.

11 There have always been issues which required states to work together. Interdependence is not new. In a sense, it is as old as the state system. To be sure, the number and scope of transnational issues that require international cooperative action have now expanded. But this is a change of degree, not kind. Globalisation is not just more interdependence.

12 While globalisation's effects are most evident in finance and economics, there are far-reaching implications across a range of issues. It affects the very notion of statehood and government as they have hitherto been understood.

13 The essential function of any government is to govern, to provide public goods and services to its citizens within its borders. But in a globalised economy, national borders no longer include sufficient territory to function as self-contained economic units. Financial geography and economic geography no longer coincide with political geography.

14 This mis-match means that governments no longer have a monopoly of legitimate power within their own state boundaries. This does not challenge the de jure sovereignty of states, but profoundly alters every government's de facto capacity to govern.

15 The challenge is not, as it was throughout history, merely of one state conscribing the sovereignty of another; of the powerful forcing their will on the weak. The real challenge is now within each state, no matter how powerful.

16 Dealing with this phenomenon poses a different kind of challenge than just insisting on the legal concept of sovereignty or persuading governments to work together on specific issues. It forces a reconceptualisation of the very idea of government and statehood. It requires a complete change of mindset by the powerful as well as the weak. This will be difficult and painful to achieve.

17 What is required is an unprecedented and qualitatively new kind of international cooperation. Not just cooperation based on the alignment of national interests as has occurred throughout history. It requires the redefinition of what constitutes both 'nation' and 'interests'. States can no longer just collide or cooperate at the boundaries of their sovereignties. It demands nothing less than shared responsibility for governance and a pooling of sovereignties.

18 For this new kind of international cooperation to be constructed and take root, the imperative of cooperation must be supported by practical experience that demonstrates that it is superior to any other political alternative. It is here that the intersection and interplay of globalisation and the post Cold War international order complicates matters.

19 The end of the Cold War at first seemed to promise a new dawn for

the UN, opening up vast potentialities for international cooperation unfettered by ideological conflict. These hopes have long been dashed. In reality, the end of the Cold War may have made international cooperation less likely.

20 Paradoxically, the ever greater integration of the world economy has been accompanied by increasing political fragmentation. The Cold War was not just an ideological geopolitical struggle. The Cold War imposed identities that transcended nationalism. Even those that sought to escape the Cold War in fact defined themselves in relation to it. Irrespective of which side we stood for, the Cold War was the organising principle for international action and the concept by which we understood global events.

21 To those disoriented by the pressures of globalisation, the end of the Cold War provided an opportunity to seek reassurance and a new identity in real or imagined ethnic nationalisms. The resulting proliferation of states and the lack of a clear organising principle for international action have made cooperation problematic.

22 The end of ideological conflict and the increasing influence of market principles in all areas of life is making economic efficiency an essential condition for evaluating political actions. But globalisation has simultaneously eroded the ability of states to muster the political consensus of their own citizens for such action. It is therefore not very surprising that the right kind of new response has not yet been forthcoming.

23 Of course, lip service is being paid to the need for new international institutions to deal with new transnational problems or to the reform of existing international institutions, the UN amongst them. But the more usual reaction to the mis-match between economic geography and the political geography of state boundaries has been defensive or a sterile triumphalism: a new protectionism, xenophobic or nostalgic nationalisms or, where a country feels strong and confident enough, a new kind of extra-territoriality, reminiscent of the 19th Century. Strong states try to project their national laws beyond their boundaries or insist on their standards as conditionalities for trade or other kinds of cooperative interactions.

24 The recognition that problems are global, and the almost universal acceptance of the market, commands at best only a superficial international consensus. The real responses – the most concrete and practical responses – have been regional rather than universal.

25 This process is most advanced in Europe and North America, through the EU and NAFTA; less so in Latin America and Asia, through MERCOSUR, APEC and the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). Tentative linkages are being explored between regions. Africa has been only peripherally engaged. But relying on regionalism as more than a stopgap in a globalised world creates a latent instability. If projected unchecked into the 21st Century, this must ultimately affect basic issues of war and peace. And it is obviously unacceptable that an entire continent be marginalised.

26 A truly universal approach to shared responsibility for global

governance and pooling sovereignties to deal with global problems requires international consensus on what is legitimately in the general interest of still sovereign states. No matter how compelling the issue or problem, this is not self-evident.

27 The definition of what is in the legitimate public interest within a specific state or nation is the product of a long historical process, cultural attributes and the level of economic development. It is the basic stuff of most political contests in most states. Consensus is not easy to reach domestically. It will certainly be even more difficult in an international system that is concurrently united and divided by globalisation and the end of the Cold War.

28 The international problem is compounded because the expectation that the post Cold War international system would be multi-polar has proved premature. A multi-polar world is still more a matter of potential rather than a current reality. This has engendered discomfort.

29 The war in Kosovo focussed such feelings. It threw into brutal relief a trend that has been underway for some time: that the absolute sovereignty of states has to be qualified to require compliance with generally accepted standards of conduct and respect for human rights.

30 This is not all that novel a notion. The traditional approach of non-interference in domestic affairs was never as absolute in practice as in theory. The doctrine of humanitarian intervention dates from the 19th Century when the powerful claimed the right to intervene in the weak. The war in Kosovo resonated with such historical memories, thus adding to the discomfort.

31 It is a fact that sovereignty now co-exists uneasily with a different current of international law concerned with the rights of individuals. These trends have not yet been reconciled. But both trends are facts that cannot be wished away. And, in any case, their logical compatibility is not the real issue.

32 Notwithstanding Kosovo, it does not appear that the majority of states have much to fear if they treat their citizens well. There are many countries that treat their citizens badly without any suggestion of any sanction harsher than moral disapproval. Concern for human rights has always been selective.

33 The more critical issue is related but different. The loss of territorial reference points engendered by globalisation's mis-match between economic and political geographies, and the loss of strategic meaning after the end of the Cold War, have made most international reactions ad hoc.

34 We lurch from crisis to crisis with no clear sense of direction or consistency. Why Kosovo or East Timor and not Africa? Are the rights of humans everywhere not universal? How to choose when to intervene amongst the too many

conflicts?

35 In his report to the General Assembly this year, the Secretary-General has posed several thoughtful challenges for us. "Nothing in the UN Charter precludes a recognition that there are rights beyond borders. What the Charter does say is that 'armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest'". The Secretary-General then asked what is the common interest? Who shall define it? Who will defend it? Under whose authority? And with what means of intervention?

36 I agree with the Secretary-General that these questions will need to be answered and criteria established. Rules and objective criteria for such interventions are urgently needed. Failure to do so will breed uncertainty and instability. If a new balance has to be struck between sovereignty and other values, it should be struck knowingly and with our eyes open. The alternative is to be led, one step at a time, with the best of intentions, by ad hoc solutions.

37 This will be a major challenge for the international community if the UN is to remain relevant in the coming Century. This is because we can expect to face many more situations which will pose the dilemma of reconciling state sovereignty with international intervention to redress violations of human rights.

38 We are all familiar with the pressures of the international media and non-governmental actors. These are realities but provide no satisfactory answers. It is not politically acceptable that questions of international peace and stability be decided on an ad hoc basis. It is even less acceptable that consensus on the need for more peaceful modes of international cooperation reflect the preoccupations of a few.

39 What we need is to replicate on a global scale those conditions that have made the pluralistic societies in advanced economies still capable of collective action. No government anywhere can rule by coercion alone or lead legitimately merely because it wields supreme power. Resort to coercion and naked power is more often than not taken to be a symptom of failure of government and not its defining feature.

40 What is therefore required on the international stage is what has already been accepted domestically, indeed insisted upon in the name of democracy: a modest acceptance of the reality of diversity and a nuanced appreciation of the difference between friends, friendly critics and honest disagreements.

41 Persuading those already disoriented by globalisation and rapid technological changes requires a patient and skilful diplomacy in the artful balance of competing interests.

Mr President

42 Despite the handicaps under which it laboured, and for all its imperfections, the UN has played a critical role in some of the great world issues of the first four decades of its existence. It eased the pangs of decolonisation. It provided a cathartic theatre to vent the most dangerous passions of the Cold War. It provided the means for the superpowers to back down from unwanted confrontations without grievous political costs to either. And from time to time, it scored notable successes in peacekeeping operations around the world. At the same time, the UN, through its specialised agencies, continues to play a vital developmental role for the majority of its members.

43 But the UN's experiences of the last decade have been less happy. The UN has played at best only a very marginal role in the great developments of the closing years of the 20th Century that I have tried to describe. It risks becoming increasingly divorced from the very international realities in which it is inescapably embedded.

44 Like all organisations of sovereign states, the UN can only provide a mechanism for its members to use for whatever purpose their agreements or disagreements dictate. But the UN cannot be just a tool of the few, a repository for issues that no country is willing or knows how to confront, or to be a convenient scapegoat. And the hard fact is that these are the roles that the UN has been forced to play in recent years. It cannot continue on this path without permanent damage.

45 In our century, the trend towards international organisation - towards the development of a more predictable pattern of relationships between states and international regimes that transcend individual sovereignties - is, I believe, established. There is no going back. Whether or not we like it or not, the world has become too complex to be dealt with except multilaterally.

46 But this does not mean that any particular international institution will necessarily play an effective role in the organisation of international life in the next Century. The UN cannot assume that it will survive intact, just by clinging on to structures and processes conceived in 1945. The world has changed dramatically since then. And it will continue to do so. The UN has no choice but to change in tandem. This imperative is clear. What is unclear is how the UN should change. That is why I have posed more questions than provided answers. The process of discussion must start now.

47 The mechanism is at our disposal. The responsibility to use it is ours. Whether we will engage ourselves in this responsibility quickly enough to make a difference to the UN is for us to choose. I do not know how much time we have. I only know that the time left is finite.

In his address to the 54th United Nations General Assembly in New York on 24 September 1999, Foreign Minister Jayakumar posed the provocative question, "Will the UN survive in the 21st Century?" He said that the UN had not yet adequately come to grips with the central challenges of the next phase of its development.

Minister Jayakumar did not predict the end of the nation state but he said that the concept of sovereignty is undergoing profound modification. The UN must work within the existing framework of the nation state even as the framework is being transformed.

The UN must cope with two powerful forces for change, namely the pressures of a truly integrated world economy and the end of the Cold War. While globalisation's effects are most evident in finance and economics, there are far-reaching implications across a range of issues. It affects the notion of statehood and government as hitherto understood.

Dealing with globalisation demands nothing less than shared responsibility for governance and pooling of sovereignties in the service of the general interest. This in turn calls for an international consensus on what is legitimately in the general interests of states.

[On the need to strike a balance between concepts of state sovereignty, non-interference and humanitarian intervention, Minister Jayakumar said:]

Striking a new balance between sovereignty and other values and devising rules and criteria for intervention will be "a major challenge for the international community if the UN is to remain relevant in the coming century". This is because we can expect to face "many more situations which will pose the dilemma of reconciling state sovereignty with international intervention".

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Minister Jayakumar noted: "The Kosovo war illustrated a trend that has been underway for some time: that absolute sovereignty has to be qualified to require compliance with generally accepted standards of conduct and respect for human rights."

However, he added, international reactions had been mainly ad hoc. "The international community lurches from crisis to crisis with no clear sense of direction or consistency. Why Kosovo or East Timor and not Africa? Are the rights of humans everywhere not universal? How to choose when to intervene among all too many conflicts?"

Minister Jayakumar agreed with UNSG Kofi Anan that rules and objective criteria needed to be devised for such interventions. Failure to do so will breed uncertainty and instability.



Minister Jayakumar concluded that the trend towards the development of international regimes that transcend individual sovereignties was now established. "There is no going back. Whether we like it or not, the world has become too complex to be dealt with except multilaterally. But this does not mean that any particular international organisation will necessarily play an effective role in the organisation of international life in the next century. The UN cannot assume that it will survive intact, just by clinging to structures and processes conceived in 1945. The world has changed dramatically since then, and will continue to do so. The UN has no choice but to change in tandem. What is unclear is how. The process of discussion must start now."

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