

**SECRETARY-GENERAL URGES SECURITY COUNCIL TO BEGIN NEW
ERA OF COOPERATION,
REACH STRONGER, EARLIER CONSENSUS IN PREVENTING
CONFLICT**

Following are UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's remarks to the Security Council during an open debate on conflict prevention, in New York, 21 August:

I thank the Presidency of the United Kingdom for convening this important debate.

Before I begin, allow me to pay tribute to an outstanding United Nations leader who joins us for the last time as High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mme. Navi Pillay. I, as Secretary-General, and I believe, these Council members have benefitted from her honest views and unvarnished reports on the terrible human rights abuses we confront in our world.

High Commissioner Pillay tells it like she sees it. When people face discrimination and abuse of human rights, they know Navi Pillay is their advocate. Where others may wish to avoid certain issues, Navi Pillay speaks forthrightly, without fear.

I am sure you join me in wishing her well in her next chapter. I have no doubt she will remain a key voice on the issues facing this Council and facing humanity. I am very proud and grateful to have worked with her during the last six years. I am sure that she will remain as an outstanding leader and honorary ambassador of the United Nations in defending human rights, and I wish you all the best. Thank you very much.

As Secretary-General, one of my core priorities is improving our Organization's ability to act early and act preventively. We know that if we do not address emerging crises, they risk becoming bigger and costlier for all. Today's debate takes place as the world is gripped by multiple violent conflicts. This highlights the enormity of the challenge of prevention, and the need to re-examine and refine our approach.

This year, we mark the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I that left an estimated 17 million dead. It was called the “war to end all wars”. Yet, in the same generation, a second World War would claim another 60 million lives. The United Nations rose from the ashes of this devastation with a mission to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. We can take heart, even at this bleak moment, that over the past quarter century, wars between States have become rare.

Yet, we cannot speak of positive trends when we look at Syria, Iraq, Gaza, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Ukraine and elsewhere. Conflicts continue to exact an unacceptable toll. Events around the world today clearly demonstrate the changing nature and complexity of contemporary conflict.

Many countries face repeated cycles of turmoil. Civil wars are no longer contained by national borders. Complex threat environments tend to emerge in contexts of State fragility, extreme poverty, weak institutions, lack of unifying leadership, porous borders, and marginalized populations. Terrorism and organized crime fuel and feed violence and instability. Distinctions between terrorists, armed opposition and criminal enterprises are blurring.

These evolving patterns of violence pose a major challenge to our prevention work. Are our common tools fit for purpose? What must we do better? How can we anticipate what lies ahead? The Security Council, which bears the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, has a unique responsibility.

Hard-won experience has taught us a number of lessons about what works in prevention — allow me to highlight five points. First, being present early is essential. I speak not just about early warning, but also about early action: quickly mobilizing effective and unified diplomatic action to defuse tensions, to urge restraint, and to open up space for dialogue before perspectives become hardened and more hostile. In recent cases, the United Nations played an important role in providing parties with a ladder to climb down from polarized positions.

It is said that “no news is good news”. And in many cases the opposite is true — good news is no news. Because of their very success, these cases did not make the headlines. But they, nevertheless, demand

our attention and resources. It takes our collective leadership and courage to address seemingly far-off, simmering problems, particularly when one may never get proof of the value of that investment. We surely have plenty of proof of the cost of not doing so.

Second, we must hone our skills. Conflict prevention and mediation are complex and increasingly specialized fields. We have made strides in building up expertise that is high-quality, rapidly deployable, and in great demand — in contexts as varied as peace negotiations, constitutional reforms, electoral processes and national dialogues.

Third, partnerships are crucial. We can only succeed if we build coalitions. I am encouraged by the number of new peace and security initiatives that have grown out of our strategic partnerships with regional and subregional organizations, in the Sahel, the Great Lakes, the Central African Republic and elsewhere.

Fourth, we must learn from collective mistakes. My “Rights Up Front” initiative places human rights considerations at the very centre of United Nations efforts in the field, Headquarters and in our discourse with Member States. It seeks to ensure that we avoid the systemic failures of the past and recognize that human rights violations are early warning signals of mass atrocities.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, is leverage. The Secretary-General can draw on the principles of the United Nations Charter and use the power of persuasion. These are powerful tools in their own right. They reflect a shared understanding among Member States. But to be effective, they require that the international community be closely aligned, empowering the Secretary-General to speak on behalf of a common voice. When Member States join forces, we can achieve much. This Council’s consensus on removing chemical weapons from Syria is one recent case in point.

Even modest United Nations actions can have an important impact when we have the Security Council’s united support — speaking with one voice — for early engagement. However, when there is limited consensus — when our actions come late and address only the lowest common denominator — the consequences can be measured in terrible loss of life, grave human suffering and tremendous loss of credibility for this Council and our institution.

There is no more important challenge before us than improving our ability to reach a stronger and earlier consensus. It is time for a new era of collaboration, cooperation and action from the Security Council. There are millions of people around the world hoping for and counting on decisive joint action by the one and only global body entrusted with the obligation to maintain international peace and security. Thank you.

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