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UNGA 60

21 SEPTEMBER 2005

GENERAL DEBATE

Statement by The Hon Alexander Downer MP Minister for Foreign Affairs

(Check against delivery)

Mr President

Australia, as a founding member of the United Nations, has long supported the organisation's important role in world affairs.

The UN has many achievements to celebrate in its sixtieth year.

Equally, the sixtieth anniversary places the UN's shortcomings, and indeed its failings, under a microscope for all to see.

In approaching this occasion, the United Nations and its members have been presented with a challenge — that is, to find practical and workable ways to bring greater security and prosperity to the people of the world through a reformed United Nations system.

This has not been easy.

The reform agenda is simultaneously vast and urgent...

...with agreement on approaches difficult — at times impossible — to achieve, as the Summit process made clear

Australia welcomes the 'Summit's progress in some important areas...

...particularly the agreement to establish a Peacebuilding Commission to assist fragile states a field of endeavour where Australia has long been active in its own region, as I have outlined in previous addresses to the General Assembly...

...and the fact States have agreed for the first time that the international community – through the UN – has the responsibility to act to protect populations from gross and systematic violations of human rights.

We also welcome the call for early conclusion of a comprehensive terrorism convention and early entry into force of the nuclear terrorism convention.

We are pleased that the Summit outcomes on development recognise what already underpins Australia's approach to development assistance – that good governance, sound economic policies, anti-corruption measures and trade liberalisation are critical elements in fighting poverty and promoting economies and stable communities.

Australia has a proud record of assistance in these areas...

...further underscored by our announcement last week of an increase in Australia's overseas aid allocation to about four billion Australian dollars by 2010 – a doubling in aid from 2004 levels...

...as well as generous contributions of ten million dollars to the UN Democracy Fund, and three million dollars to the Peacebuilding Fund over three years.

As a nation that strongly supports an ambitious outcome to the Doha Round of multilateral trade negotiations and recognises the crucial importance of this to developing nations, Australia also welcomes the pledge and challenge put forward by President Bush a week ago that the United States is ready to eliminate all tariffs, subsidies and other barriers if other nations do the same.

Mr President

But alongside these welcome outcomes, many questions and, in some cases, vast disappointments, remain.

On arms control and non-proliferation we have absolutely nothing to show – an extraordinarily poor outcome given a contemporary global security environment in which proliferation threats are so clearly evident.

The outdated ideology that too many delegations brought to negotiations was a damningly deep reflection on the intergovernmental process at the United Nations.

We did not grasp the opportunity provided by the largest-ever gathering of world leaders to produce a political declaration defining acts of terrorism.

How can some nations continue to assert that the deliberate maiming and targeting of civilians is sometimes justified?

How is it— after atrocities in Sharm el-Sheikh, Istanbul, Jakarta, Riyadh and on a daily basis in Iraq — that some continue to employ double standards, deceiving themselves that such terrorists could ever be considered to be 'freedom fighters'?

This is not an argument about the merits of a particular cause. It is about the moral imperative to outlaw behaviour that offends civilisation.

We were disappointed that the Summit missed the opportunity to make progress on Security Council reform — to ensure the Council's membership and functioning match the priorities and realities of this century.

And while the Summit resolved to create a Human Rights Council, the outcomes document is disappointingly short on detail.

A new Human Rights Council must overcome the credibility deficit that plagues current human rights machinery, and that sees some of the most egregious human rights abusers elevated to positions of leadership.

Australia will participate constructively in negotiations on the shape of this new Council. We will also more than double — to \$650,000 — our contribution to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Finally, the management reforms agreed at the Summit are a step in the right direction, but they are just that — one step.

The Secretary-General needs more authority and flexibility to manage the UN.

And — as recent inquiries have highlighted in sobering detail — the UN's accountability, audit and oversight systems must be massively strengthened.

It will not be easy, but we must address anew our failures.

Mr President

The Summit heralded an historic shift in our thinking on humanitarian intervention...

...showing a willingness to embrace a new mindset, one which addresses our responsibility to watch out for each other in times of need...

... our collective "responsibility to protect".

Too often the world has stood by watching humanitarian disasters unfold before international machinery has creaked into action.

In Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo action taken was too little, too late. Today, the situation in Darfur epitomises these shortcomings.

As the Summit outcome makes clear, all States have a responsibility to protect their own population from egregious crimes such as genocide and crimes against humanity.

And where a population is suffering serious harm, and the relevant State is unwilling or unable to stop this, the principle of non-intervention should yield to the collective responsibility to protect.

The Security Council must now rely on this new consensus to respond more effectively to humanitarian crises.

We have a responsibility to react faster to situations of compelling human need...

...and must do more to help countries rebuild, recover and reconcile after conflicts or disasters.

Mr President

In the last year we have seen the people of Afghanistan and Iraq exercise restored democratic rights.

The international community must continue support for their transformations...

...help them to leave behind the experience of brutal dictators and narrow regimes...

...and ensure that progress and democracy take root.

Ceding any ground in Iraq or Afghanistan to the tyranny of terrorism and the violent suffering it brings would be a backward step in our global campaign...

...a campaign we continue to fight but have not yet won, as the July terrorist attacks in London and the ongoing terrorist menace in South-East Asia and elsewhere make clear.

There remains an urgent need for nations to come together to confront terrorists in the battle of ideas, contest extremist ideologies...

...and build greater and more productive dialogue between faiths and civilisations.

Australia is doing its utmost in our region to tackle terrorism and the ideology that feeds it.

UN machinery must also play a part.

Many Member States still need assistance to implement UN counter-terrorism standards and build their counter-terrorism capabilities — the kind of outcomes Australia is already pursuing in cooperation with its regional partners.

Leaders made some progress in this direction last week, but did not adopt the Secretary-General's counter-terrorism strategy.

Mr President

Australia welcomed the General Assembly's adoption of the International Convention for the Suppression of Nuclear Terrorism in April this year.

Our Prime Minister John Howard signed this Convention for Australia at the Summit.

It is now imperative that we redouble our efforts to conclude the Comprehensive Convention against Terrorism during this session of the General Assembly.

Closing the gaps in the counter-terrorism legal framework is an essential complement to our concerted efforts to prevent future attacks...

...and to prosecute those who commit terrorist acts.

Effective international efforts to criminalise such acts are a vital step forward.

The world today is confronted by a menace not envisaged at the time the Geneva Conventions were drafted...

...terrorist organisations and their footsoldiers — like those captured in Afghanistan who bear arms on a battlefield but pay no heed to the laws of war, fight for no regular army, wear no uniform, and no recognisable insignia.

Just as international law evolved to deal with another scourge of another age — piracy — so today a Comprehensive Convention Against Terrorism is needed to help deal with these perpetrators of terrorist acts.

Mr President

The Summit was a lost opportunity on disarmament and non-proliferation.

Multilateral non-proliferation regimes are being tested now by a small minority of governments that flout the norms and standards observed by the rest of the international community.

And who in doing so imperil the security of us all.

A dangerous new dimension to this global challenge is the known ambition of terrorists to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

It is therefore imperative that we take practical action against proliferation as it Occurs...

...through innovative measures like the Proliferation Security Initiative that complement and reinforce multilateral regimes.

Earlier this year I saw first-hand the NPT Review Conference be thwarted by a few countries determined to prevent consensus.

Australia — together with the overwhelming majority of states — remains unwavering in its support for the NPT....

...and we will continue to take a leading role in universalising the Additional Protocol on strengthened nuclear safeguards, making it a pre-condition for the supply of uranium to non-nuclear weapon states.

It is not acceptable in the current global climate that we have not started negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty...

...a treaty which would reduce the risk of leakage of fissile material to proliferators or terrorists and buttress nuclear disarmament gains made to date.

This afternoon I am pleased to be chairing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Article XIV Conference, looking for ways to accelerate that treaty's entry into force.

And a firmer and more active UN Security Council role on WMD issues is also sorely needed.

Mr President

Australia is a committed and long-term supporter of the UN and the vital role that it can play in promoting international peace and security.

We have a proud record of contributing to UN activities, funding and debates, extending back to its formation in 1945.

But we are not an uncritical supporter.

The need to reform the UN has been a consistent theme since I first addressed the General Assembly, at the fifty-first session in 1996.

Such a need is all the more compelling today.

The reality is that there continue to be states failing or in precipitous decline for no reasons other than poor leadership and poor governance with disastrous results for human lives.

What does it say when the international community proves unwilling to act when misrule has caused life expectancy to plunge in what was one of Africa's most promising countries from around 63 years in the early 1990s to just under 34 years in 2004?

Would today's UN be able to prevent another Rwanda?

We — and the publics of the world — expect much of the United Nations.

And rightly so.

The stakes are too high in this complex and challenging security environment to accept anything less.

We all have a part to play. There was some welcome progress at the Summit.

But where we have fallen short, we must acknowledge it.

And be ambitious in pursuing more meaningful reform.

Large challenges loom before us.

We should approach them with a degree of realism.

Australia does not believe the UN is the answer to all the problems of the world.

But it does have a role to play. And, when we call on the UN, it must be able to fulfil that role effectively and expeditiously.

The publics of the world expect nothing less.