



General Assembly

Fifty-first Session

29th plenary meeting
Thursday, 10 October 1996, 10 a.m.
New York

Official Records

President: Mr. Razali Ismail (Malaysia)

The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Agenda item 9 (continued)

General debate

Address by The Honourable Navinchandra Ramgoolam, Prime Minister of the Republic of Mauritius

The President: The Assembly will now hear a statement by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Mauritius.

The Honourable Navinchandra Ramgoolam, Prime Minister of the Republic of Mauritius, was escorted to the rostrum.

The President: I have great pleasure in welcoming the Prime Minister of the Republic of Mauritius and inviting him to address the General Assembly.

Mr. Ramgoolam (Mauritius): I join all those who have gone before me in congratulating you, Sir, on behalf of Mauritius, on your accession to the office of President of the General Assembly at its fifty-first session. I also thank Mr. Freitas do Amaral of Portugal for his skilful stewardship of the fiftieth session.

Hearing and reading the speeches of world leaders to this Assembly, I am struck by the extraordinary degree of unanimity between them — how much we seem to agree in principle but how little on the right course of action; on the necessity of diplomacy and discussion as the primary path to peace; on the necessity of according to every man, woman and child the fundamental rights and freedoms which this Organization has, over the years, done so much to establish; on the necessity of providing equal opportunities for men, women and children in all our societies; on the necessity of

protecting the environment; and on the need to ensure that mankind moves forward together on the path of development.

Mr. Wilmot (Ghana), Vice-President, took the Chair.

In all these noble and commendable aims we are united. However, we often seem to suffer from a paralysis when it comes to actual implementation of these good intentions.

This Organization was the response of the human race to the catastrophic experiences of two world wars and to scientific discoveries and inventions which confronted us with unprecedented choices. It was an expression of faith in the power of human beings to be rational in the face of these choices and to choose the paths of peace and progress instead of war and destruction.

But sometimes its voice has seemed very faint and far off in the midst of the terrible troubles that have afflicted us since then. Some have begun to mutter of the ineffectiveness of the institution and to complain of the cost. I am convinced that those criticisms do not begin to express the whole truth about the work that is done by this Organization. We are embarked upon a great and necessary experiment, and that is why the work of the Secretary-General is so important. Here I should like to pay tribute to Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, whose contribution has been so valuable in recent years. It is particularly appropriate that this great office should be filled, as we move into the next millennium, by a representative of Africa, for Africa remains the great intransigent challenge which the world has scarcely yet begun to face. Only through the renewed and concerted determination of this Organization and the vision of cooperation and mutual responsibility which it represents is there any hope of successfully meeting the extraordinary difficulties which the next century will bring.

Decade after decade, many of the nations of Africa have seen their efforts at development frustrated by natural and man-made disasters, poor governance and a hostile international environment. Foreign aid has not had the desired impact on the progress of these countries, and the poorer nations have accumulated huge and unmanageable debt which they labour, with inadequate tools, to support.

As the Assembly knows, of the 36 poorest countries in the world, as classified by the United Nations Development Programme in the human development index, 29 are in Africa. The majority of them have per capita incomes lower than they were 20 years ago. The countries of sub-Saharan Africa last year attracted only 3 per cent of the foreign direct investment into the developing world, compared to 20 per cent for Latin America and the Caribbean and 59 per cent for East Asia and the Pacific region. Life expectancy is placed at 50.9 years, the lowest among developing countries.

At the same time, a new and more demanding international economic order is emerging, one in which Africa is beginning to feel overwhelmed and isolated from the mainstream of world economic development. If some of its nations have not yet caught up with the industrial revolution, what hope have they, unaided, of reaching the heights of the technological and information revolutions which are sweeping the developed countries of the world towards new horizons.

If we are to bring Africa into the general march of the economies of the world towards progress and prosperity, we must begin, at the highest level, to coordinate and to chart a course for Africa to join in. Piecemeal aid and occasional intervention on the occasion of awesome disasters will not be enough.

Therefore, we welcome the Group of Seven's commitment in Lyon to a partnership for development and to the elimination of trade barriers to exports from developing countries. These barriers must come down. But we question whether this and private investment alone will be sufficient. Swift and dramatic debt relief for countries in need of it is essential. We welcome the lead provided by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in this regard, but it must be followed by decisive and urgent action. Measures should also be designed to promote the growth of real democracy and good governance, for economic prosperity must go hand in hand with democracy and the rule of law. It may seem temporarily otherwise. It may seem that the creation of wealth can, for a while, be separated

from the yearning of the people and of individuals to be free, but sooner or later the force of the aspirations which prosperity brings will burst forth, as the waters burst from the dam.

Surely we must look with dismay at many areas of our world in which human rights are discounted or denied. A case in point is Myanmar, where a democratic vote, held in 1990, has been defeated and denied by force, and where the house of the elected leader of the people is kept under constant surveillance and surrounded by soldiers.

My Government will continue to support the cause of democracy and human rights in Africa and wherever in the world such support is required. Mauritius will later this month host the twentieth session of the African Commission of Human and People's Rights, which commemorates the tenth anniversary of its African Charter. This session of the Commission will undertake, with the participation of non-governmental organizations and other interested elements of civil society, an assessment and reevaluation of the implementation of the Charter and prepare a five-year plan of action which we are confident will greatly help strengthen and improve the situation of human rights in our continent.

My country, whose only resources are the stability of its democracy and the enterprising spirit of its people, comprises many races, cultures and religions. We look to Europe, Africa, the Far East and the Indian subcontinent for our cultural inheritance. Our people cross many divides. Therefore, we are able to witness and sense the impact of the rapid development of the modern world upon these different cultures and peoples more quickly, because we are a part of them. And I can tell the Assembly that what we see gives us cause for concern.

As the old world order passes and a new one replaces it, we are going through a period of transition fraught with pitfalls and dangers. We cannot but be dismayed at the number of countries that are falling prey to the ancient and deadly sirens of ethnicity and narrow nationalism that appeal to man's baser instincts of intolerance and xenophobic fear. Our continent of Africa seems particularly affected. Somalia and Liberia seem to descend endlessly into chaos, while Burundi threatens to blow up again.

We are concerned by recent indications that parties to the Middle East peace process may be giving in to the temptation of pandering to extremist fringes. We owe

peace to this Holy Land and to the generations to come. We owe it to the memory of two statesmen who laid down their lives to this cause. The resolute pursuit of peace is the only way to defeat the assassins, those who felled President Sadat and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

In the Commonwealth family of nations to which we belong, the uniqueness of which is its very diversity, a number of Member States are blighted by this affliction.

Mauritius fervently hopes that the sister island of Fiji will soon be able to resume its rightful place in the comity of nations by correcting the inequities written into that nation's constitution in a moment of tension, when racist passions were unbridled. We would be pleased to share with the people of Fiji our own constitutional experience of a pluricultural society.

In my own country, only 10 months ago in a free and democratic election, the people voted overwhelmingly for change. The Government has pledged to render our democratic process even more transparent and unequivocal. The numerous strategies and policy objectives enunciated by the new Government at the beginning of the current legislature, earlier this year, aim precisely at confronting squarely the problems that we face on all the issues that I have broached. Our overriding objective will be to ultimately make the economy work for the people and not the people work for the economy.

While a Government's overall objective is to improve the well-being of the people, sound economic policies alone will not make our countries prosper. In order to create the right environment for the economy to flourish there must be good governance. This is also a moral imperative. The history of mankind inevitably moves in the direction of greater freedom, more transparency, wider accountability in all sectors of public life and greater access to information held by public agencies relating to citizens.

My Government is committed to a continuing process of democratization which will reinforce our institutions by creating wider confidence in them. We are convinced that this will create a climate more conducive to investment and will enhance the creative and entrepreneurial spirit of our people.

While the pursuit of happiness has perforce to be individual and private, it cannot be to the detriment of the collective good. The protection of the environment is one endeavour that has to be undertaken collectively at the

national as well as the global level. Only if mankind as a whole takes care to ensure the integrity of our planet can we envisage a future for generations yet to be born. It is up to us to ensure the viability and ecological health of the planet we shall bequeath to those who come after us. My Government will pursue on its own national territory a vigorous policy of conservation and rehabilitation of natural resources. Our actions at the national level will be matched by our contributions at the international and regional levels, in concert with all our partners, to advance on these same issues.

Through our membership in regional and subregional organizations, we are undertaking, in close partnership with neighbouring countries, to advance and promote the same objectives that I have defined. Only one year after joining the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Mauritius has become an active member, putting its skills and knowledge in sectors where it has acquired valuable experience at the service of fellow members.

Mauritius informed this Assembly last year that it had initiated a process for the creation of a regional cooperation platform in the Indian Ocean region. Indeed, the Indian Ocean region was the only one in the world which did not have such a platform to discuss the economic and social development policies of its countries in a coordinated manner. I am pleased to inform the Assembly this year that the Mauritius Indian Ocean Rim Initiative has gathered considerable momentum. The Initiative, which started with only seven countries, has doubled its membership to 14 countries. A charter has been drawn up to provide the relevant framework within which to develop and implement regional cooperation programmes. In addition, in contrast with some existing regional blocs, it has adopted an outward-looking approach, so as to be compatible with the multilateral system. The association has the distinguishing feature of having adopted a tripartite approach comprising government, the private sector and the academic community, to ensure as wide a consensus as possible.

Mauritius is convening a ministerial meeting in the first week of March 1997 to give political blessing to the Indian Ocean rim association for regional cooperation. The Indian Ocean region can now serenely look forward to playing its role, as a serious regional partner in the international arena, in the effort to uplift the standard of living of the peoples of the region. I am sure that the international community will lend its full support to this nascent regional grouping, in line with the often repeated

appeal for South-South cooperation.

We have witnessed in recent years the growing significance of regional accords and blocs in determining and fashioning the orientation of multilateral financial and trading systems and institutions. We believe that regionalization is a necessary step towards a more liberal global environment inasmuch as it allows the less endowed countries and regions with specificities of their own to experiment and to test the political, economic and social reforms of their programmes. A similar approach has been adopted by the more advanced countries and regions, as evidenced by the emergence of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the consolidation of existing groupings, such as the European Union and the Association of South-East Asian Nations, to mention just a couple of them.

In addition, we have witnessed a new interpretation of the concept of regional blocs as purely geographical units that make use of their own individual characteristics to experiment, and to test political, economic and social reforms programmes within a smaller geographical entity before challenges are confronted on a worldwide scale.

Regionalization is increasingly being viewed by aid donors and international financial institutions as a means to promote overall economic development and to create an enabling environment that will attract foreign direct investment in specific regions. This process has also changed the way in which international businesses and multinational corporations are restructuring their activities. Improvements in telecommunications facilities, the adoption of advanced technology for the transmission of information in real time and the use of more rapid and reliable modes of transportation have all contributed to giving regionalization a new dimension in political and economic issues. Hence, the prospects for ensuring a more balanced global development process are more real and attainable.

The decades-old partnership between African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) States and the European Union through the Lomé Conventions, the fourth of which will come to an end in the year 2000, has served as an excellent instrument for trading agreements between the African, Asian, Pacific and Caribbean countries and the European Union. This instrument has to a very large extent helped in consolidating the links between the ACP States and the European Union. It has permitted the growth of trade, economic, political, social and cultural development, for both developed and underdeveloped countries. However, the

successor agreement to Lomé IV will have to take into account the changing pattern in world trade and the acquired benefits under the Lomé Conventions, and in this context we shall wait for the publication of the green book on the subject commissioned by the European Union.

The Sugar Protocol, which provides for guaranteed prices and quotas for the ACP sugar-producing countries, has been instrumental to a large extent in the socio-economic development of Mauritius.

While I have addressed development issues mainly, we should not overlook the crucial question of disarmament. The principled stand of Mauritius in the field of disarmament has always been to advocate a world free of nuclear weapons as well as chemical and other weapons of mass destruction. On the question of nuclear weapons, we once again reaffirm our total commitment to nuclear disarmament, and hope that the world community will make all efforts to secure unanimity around the views expressed in this Assembly by Member States that have some difficulties with some treaty provisions. Furthermore, with regard particularly to the position of Mauritius on the recent decision on the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, we stood by the principle that we have always applied to other issues in the past, namely that of fairness and non-discrimination against any party. It is therefore imperative that we give renewed momentum to the disarmament process in general, and address the flaws of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty urgently.

In order to meet the challenges of the next century, we believe that it is urgently necessary to pursue the reform of the United Nations. It is vital that the Security Council should be enlarged and made more representative and balanced among its permanent members, and should include developing countries such as India. And it is equally imperative that the Working Groups of the General Assembly should complete their task of producing an effective and credible programme for reform. It seems to us self-evident that, after 50 years, some revision and redesign is necessary. We think, with Shakespeare,

“When we mean to build,
We first survey the plot, then draw the model;
And when we see the figure of the house,
Then we must rate the cost of the erection;
Which if we find outweighs ability,
What do we then but draw anew the model
In fewer offices...?” (*King Henry IV, Part 2, Act I,
Scene 3*)

Some have come to this Assembly in order to complain that the world and the United Nations are not doing enough. But we should inquire of ourselves first: What are we doing to advance or to hinder these causes upon which, in principle, there is such remarkable agreement?

After this overview of the world situation, allow me to speak of a matter of national interest to us. One of the fundamental principles to which we all subscribe is that of respect for the sovereignty of Member States. Interference in the internal affairs of States and disregard for their national sovereignty has often been a source of tension and conflict. Now that the cold war is behind us and we move towards ever greater economic, commercial and cultural integration, we should be able to find amicable answers to questions of sovereignty. Mauritius has sovereignty disputes regarding the Chagos Archipelago and Tromelin Island with two countries with which we have historically close and friendly ties. These differences were referred to as friendly disputes by Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam, architect of our independence and father our nation. We hope to resolve these differences through quiet diplomacy and dialogue.

The cold war has died, but the need for peace and security lives on. The state of affairs in the world today challenges us but must not daunt us. Against this background, the principle of meliorism — that the world may be made better by human effort — should prevail in our actions. Those who have the means and capabilities to help should not waver or shy away at the call of the United Nations.

These are some of the ideas that I wanted to share today. It is my hope that we will all join in a global partnership for the achievement of a better and stronger United Nations at the service of the peoples in whose name we stand here.

The Acting President: On behalf of the General Assembly, I wish to thank the Prime Minister of the Republic of Mauritius for the statement he has just made.

The Honourable Navinchandra Ramgoolam, Prime Minister of the Republic of Mauritius, was escorted from the rostrum.