



Indian Council of World Affairs
Sapru House, Barakhamba Road
New Delhi

38th Sapru House Lecture

by



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on

**Presidency of Hope – 76th UNGA:
COVID Pandemic and the Need for Reformed Multilateralism**

Sapru House, New Delhi
23 July 2021

Thank you very much Ambassador Manjeev Singh Puri for that very generous introduction. Thank you also, Dr. Raghavan, for the very warm welcome accorded to me, and this opportunity to speak here at the Indian Council of World Affairs.

It is indeed a special honour to be here in New Delhi. When I last visited Delhi in April of this year, India was at the cusp of one of the most aggressive surges of COVID19 anywhere in the world. But the legendary resilience of the Indian people has once again, shined through. The enduring spirit of the Indian people will, most definitely, lead this great country to overcome any challenge it faces. I have full trust in that.

We also have full trust in the generosity of the Indian people. Around the world today, Indian generosity has ensured that people in 95 countries have COVID19 vaccines. Essential medicines were gifted by India to more than 150 countries. And I, with the world, applauds this leadership!

Dear Colleagues,

Last year, the world was brought to its knees by a virus we could not see. Life as we knew it changed considerably. At the end of the year—we saw glimmers of hope.

Vaccines were being developed. But no one had a clear picture of how quickly production could be scaled up, nor how effective the vaccine could be.

Today, as the dust settles, we could perhaps say, the picture is a bit clearer. But it is not something to celebrate. We now know that the world's economy shrank by 4.3% in 2020, wiping out trillions of dollars.

We know that countries have fallen further into debt. For the first time in 20 years, global poverty is likely to increase significantly. 114 million people lost their jobs in 2020, while many have had their working hours or pays cut, or fallen into economic inactivity - meaning they had to withdraw from the labour force.

We now know that women, people of colour, indigenous people, young people, the poor, have been affected the most. More than 1.7 billion students—that is about 99% of the world's student population—have been impacted by school or university closures. Commercial flights dropped by 42%, disrupting connectivity, and supply chains.

If this time last year, we were grappling with a pandemic we could not understand, trying to understand the long terms impacts we could not assess, struggling for information...this year, we are figuring out—or we need to figure out—how we overcome this! How we return to normalcy—a new normal—a different normal!

Over the course of the campaign for the Presidency of the General Assembly, I was asked many times, the question “why hope?”. My answer - why not?

Today, we live in a world in despair. Disease prevails in every corner. Floods are washing away lives and livelihoods. Heat waves are burning up communities. Conflict rages on. Acts of terrorism too.

This is a bleak world indeed. But, there have been glimmers of light. In the small acts of kindness that have made huge impacts. In the countless sacrifices health workers and front line workers have made across the world. In the unrelenting spirit of scientists who have found a vaccine in record time. Here, in these incidences, hope lives. Hope grows.

Hope—it is what drives us forward. Hope is what will make us stand up once again. Hope is what we need today. To counter this bleak world of disease, despair and devastation.

Hope is also in-built into the ethos of every Maldivian. We are a small country. A country of many challenges. That has been dealt many blows, and face the wrath of climate change every day. We would have given up many years ago, if not for hope. It is what keeps us going. The promise of a better tomorrow. The hope of a better tomorrow.

This is why I chose hope as the central theme of my Presidency. While the 75th session was about confronting COVID19, the 76th session must be about recovery!

This is why the theme that I have chosen for the General Debate of the 76th session of the General Assembly focuses on looking forward, on building resilience, with hope as our driving force.

My immediate priority will be Recovering from Covid19. The impacts have been immense, and yet still, this pandemic seems to be far from over.

New variants are emerging. And we are still unclear about the longer term health consequences. The United Nations can, and MUST do more to address this.

Building on existing initiatives and approaches, I will be looking to address the health of our people and our economies. And work to ensure vaccine equity. We need to vaccinate the world. No one is safe, until everyone is safe.

Together, we need to overcome the challenges that we face in vaccinating the world. This includes private sector, philanthropic organisations, academia, scientists, and governments.

We need to look towards building back better, building back stronger and bluer. We started 2020, fully intent on making the ensuing decade a Decade of Action—generating momentum on realizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

But today, the Decade of Action has had to become the Decade of Recovery. This is why my second ray of hope - my second priority is Rebuilding Sustainably.

A post Covid world would ideally be... a world without extreme poverty, one that is more sustainable, more resilient.

A world where we have taken meaningful action on addressing hunger and food insecurity. Where we have realised access to quality education, and bridged the digital divide.

It is a world where the means of implementation are realized. A world at peace. Targeted interventions will be needed. To ensure that no one is left behind. To ensure that no country, is left behind.

The needs of our home, our planet, must be addressed as a matter of urgency. COVID19 has not replaced the challenges of climate change, ocean health, desertification and land degradation, and loss of biodiversity.

Infact, it has limited the scope for addressing these challenges, as limited resources have been diverted towards the pandemic.

But the impacts of climate change are worsening. A glance at this month's headlines...heatwaves, floods, tidal waves...these are all signs of a climate emergency. The seventy-sixth session can be a "super session for nature", with multiple conferences and meetings—such as COP26 on climate change, the Ocean Conference, COP15 biodiversity, and COP15 on desertification, the energy dialogue, conferences on sustainable transport, and food systems—there is momentum on responding to the needs of our planet.

Addressing the needs of our people is equally important. Especially given that humanity, human rights, have taken a back slide during this pandemic—as more and more people lived through lockdowns and extreme measures had to be taken around the world.

Ensuring that we respect the rights of all, mobilizing the collective will and conscience of humanity, is a process requiring constant work. I have pledged to ensure more voice and more space for young people in the General Assembly.

I truly believe that we need to fully ensure participation of young people in decision-making processes that affect their future. Gender equality is a top priority of mine. I will raise my voice against gender discrimination. Advocate for gender equality. My office will be gender balanced.

Now, these priorities that I have outlined above - the demands of the day - can only be addressed with a stronger, effective, efficient, transparent, and accountable United Nations. A United Nations that is more representative of the Charter's first three words "We, the Peoples".

A United Nations family, that works together, coordinates, cooperates, and enhances coherence. A United Nations that is more inclusive - that hears the views of all, that takes into accounts the needs of all.

And my responsibility is to ensure that the General Assembly demands and designs a United Nations that is ready, that is able, and that is best suited to serve the needs of the day. This is why my fifth ray of hope is Reforming the United Nations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe that the concept of “reformed multilateralism” put forward by Prime Minister Modi during his statement at the General Debate of the 75th session of the General Assembly, highlighted these facets as well.

The need to ensure transparent and inclusive decision making, the need to understand and recognize the links between peace, security, and development, and the need to adopt a multi-stakeholder approach. He highlighted this in the context of making the United Nations “fit for purpose” - to address the challenges of the day.

In considering the role of the United Nations in addressing global issues, we need to consider the strengths of the United Nations. I believe that the strength of the United Nations lies in its ability to shape norms, change discourse, forge consensus.

The United Nations has the convening power to bring together the best minds, the best ideas, the best practices, and forge the best solutions. The United Nations has the ability to provide platforms for countries, peoples, to share ideas, and find solutions that work for all.

The United Nations has the expertise at hand, to assess situations on the ground, and deliver targeted interventions where necessary, hand-in-hand with local authorities.

I believe this is the strength of the United Nations. This is where the United Nations can make its mark. And this important role can truly be realized through establishing trust in the United Nations.

Trust can be built by bringing the United Nations closer to the people. By increasing its efficiency, its effectiveness, By making the United Nations deliver! Deliver for people, for the planet, and for prosperity!

The COVID19 pandemic may have put the world in crisis. But I believe this could also be an opportunity. To build a stronger, resilient world. A more sustainable world. This could be an opportunity to enhance multilateralism, strengthen cooperation.

This is an opportunity for the United Nations. To once again, just like it did in the aftermath of the Great Wars, play a central role, in rebuilding communities, rescuing the planet, recovering economies, and above all, restoring hope!

As President of the General Assembly, I will do all I can, I will give all I can, to make this a reality!

I thank you.

