

Statement by Finland

76th General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly

New York, 21 September 2021

Statement by

The President of the Republic of Finland

Sauli Niinistö

at the 76th General Debate of the United Nations

General Assembly

New York, 21 September 2021

(check against delivery)

Mr President, Secretary-General, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, I would like to congratulate Mr Abdulla Shahid for his election as the President of the seventy-sixth session of the General Assembly. I also want to congratulate Mr Antonio Guterres for the re-election for his second term as Secretary-General. Both of you can count on Finland's full support for your important work.

Finland warmly welcomes the ambitious approach put forward in the Secretary-General's "Our Common Agenda". It is easy to agree with one of the key statements in that document: "In our biggest shared test since the Second World War, humanity faces a stark and urgent choice: a breakdown or a breakthrough."

We are indeed at a critical juncture. If humanity is to make the right choice, a breakthrough rather than a breakdown, we have to shoulder our human responsibilities. Responsibilities for our common future.

The task may seem daunting. The past year has witnessed continued and even growing turbulence in the world. Volatility and uncertainty may easily lead to despair. Common solutions may seem far out of reach.

At the same time, many trends highlight how interconnected our world is. The pandemic has had an impact on every one of us. The same will increasingly be true of climate change and emerging technologies alike. Conflicts no longer remain local or regional – they have consequences, direct or indirect, across the globe. All of these cross-border challenges are crying for a global response. With the right mindset, such a response is within reach.

In nineteen-seventy-five, thirty years after the United Nations was founded, thirty-five heads of state and government gathered in the Finnish capital to sign the Helsinki Final Act. The letter of that document, still valid today, focused on security and cooperation in Europe.

But the spirit that arose from that meeting // can have a more global significance, if we succeed in reviving and expanding it. A willingness of adversaries and competitors to engage in dialogue, to build trust, and to seek common denominators – that was the essence of the Helsinki Spirit. Its potential today // is by no means limited to the OSCE area.

It is precisely that kind of a spirit that the entire world, and the United Nations, urgently needs. I am convinced that the more we speak about the Helsinki Spirit, the closer we get to rekindling it – and to making it come true. And that will bring us closer to solving our common challenges together.

* * *

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Over a year and half since its beginning, we still live in the shadow of the COVID-nineteen pandemic. Fortunately, there is now some light at the end of the tunnel in many countries. Yet we should resist the temptation to think about health security on a national basis alone.

The scientific community has shown a better example than governments. To end this pandemic, the solution has to be global. For a global response to succeed, we need to ensure equitable access to effective remedies. Working through COVAX, Finland is strongly committed to vaccine solidarity.

Global action is also needed in order to be better prepared for future pandemics. It is high time to take concrete steps to improve our common health security beyond the current challenges.

To improve our resilience, we need a One Health approach. Enhancing international collaboration on research and development, and exchanging information on emerging threats is vital. We must ensure the effective functioning of the multilateral global health institutions, such as the World Health Organization.

We must also take pause to reflect upon the long-term ramifications of COVID-nineteen. It has led to an increase in extreme poverty and inequality, and resulted in a deterioration of gender equality. It has seriously affected many countries' ability to reach the Sustainable Development Goals. We must intensify our efforts to ensure that the most vulnerable are not left further behind.

* * *

Mr President,

The pandemic has shown that a severe enough concern can push us to take unprecedented steps. In a very short order, we all have taken more extreme measures to change our behaviour than any one of us could have imagined before. What would be a sufficient wake-up call for us to do the same for the health of our planet?

With the Twenty-thirty Agenda, the Paris Climate Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity, we already have plenty of documents and roadmaps to rely on. But talk is not enough. We need to act, and the time for action is now.

The rapidly proceeding loss of biodiversity alone should be a cause for immediate global concern. In addition, we now know that climate change is proceeding even faster than was previously thought. According to the IPCC, we are likely to reach the one-point-five degrees temperature rise already in the early twenty-thirties. It is not an exaggeration to say that we are facing a global climate emergency.

And yet, that urgency is still not reflected in our deeds. The Nationally Determined Contributions we, the signatories of the Paris Agreement, have made so far, may still put us on a track of a two-point-seven degree temperature rise by the end of this century. The consequences for the planet, and for future generations, would be catastrophic.

We have to use the upcoming COP twenty-six conference to put ourselves on a sustainable course. It is our common responsibility, that of governments and

institutions, of companies and individuals, to step up. We need more ambitious emission reduction plans well ahead of the meeting in Glasgow. And we must speed up the ongoing transition away from fossil fuels.

To succeed, we need adequate climate financing. As a global community, we have to increase the quality, quantity and accessibility of climate finance, in particular to the Least Developed Countries and the Small Island Developing States.

We must also encourage finance ministers to take climate change into account in all of their decision-making. The Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action, co-chaired by Finland and Indonesia, has already more than sixty members. It currently focuses on green recovery, carbon pricing and biodiversity. We invite more countries to join the work of this coalition.

* * *

Mr President,

The dramatic events of Afghanistan in the past weeks have again reminded us of the fragility of peace and security. The humanitarian needs in Afghanistan are immense, and it is critical that we act together to ensure the access of humanitarian assistance to its people. The UN organizations staying on in Afghanistan play a key role here. And the international community must be steadfast on this: women and girls in Afghanistan must not be forgotten or made invisible.

Yet, unfortunately, Afghanistan is just one example. Conflicts, old and new ones, continue to cause human suffering across the world. The diplomatic toolbox of the Charter needs to be used to its full potential, to build peace where needed, and to prevent conflicts where possible.

For Finland, conflict prevention and mediation are strong priorities.

We continue to be ready and willing to offer our good services for constructive dialogue in this regard.

* * *

Mr President,

In its foreign policy, Finland has long underscored the importance of the universal and binding nature of human rights. Our own experience is that a society flourishes // when everyone has an active, equal and meaningful role in it.

Finland is a candidate to the UN Human Rights Council for the period from twenty-twenty-two to twenty-twenty-four. As a member of the Council, we will do our best to make our human rights priorities work for the benefit of peace, stability and prosperity across the world.

In our human rights policy, we pay special attention to the rights of those in the most vulnerable situation, the ones most exposed to discrimination.

Promoting the rights of persons with disabilities is a crosscutting priority for Finland.

Another key theme for us are the rights of all women and girls. The recently launched Generation Equality campaign, in which Finland co-leads // the Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation, has an important role in mobilizing different actors for gender equality.

* * *

Mr President,

In an era of intensifying great-power competition and rapid technological progress, we are also faced with a serious risk of a new arms race. If the unravelling of the international arms control system is allowed to continue, it reduces predictability and increases the likelihood of unintended escalation.

That will make all of us less secure. We urgently need to remedy the situation.

The most important task is to uphold and strengthen the existing arms control architecture. But at the same time, we also need to think ahead with an open mind. We have to develop new solutions to respond to emerging challenges and technologies, by strengthening confidence-building, verification and transparency.

In nuclear arms control, Finland welcomes the extension of New START. Yet it is also clear that engagement between all the nuclear powers would be beneficial for global security.

* * *

Mr President,

The need to come together and to save the planet for the future generations has rarely been greater. For Finland, the UN system is at the core of the rules-based order we want to defend, and the multilateralism we want to strengthen.

No other organization has the same legitimacy or the same normative impact. No other organization gives hope to so many people for a better world. No other organization can deliver the future we want, and the future we deserve.

But the United Nations can only succeed if we, its members, want to come together and do what is needed and expected from us. That requires more dialogue. That requires more trust. That requires more Helsinki Spirit from all of us. In this spirit, Finland continues its unwavering support for the United Nations.