

## **The Importance of Geneva to the United Nations**

Address

by Mr. Vladimir Petrovsky

Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations

Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva

at the Seminar on the United Nations for Swiss Parliamentarians

Geneva, Palais des Nations, 20 August 1998

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Mr. President,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I accepted the invitation to participate in our meeting today with great satisfaction. The dialogue with the parliamentarians whose decisions affect both national and international affairs is part and parcel of our work. Our dialogue with you is of particular importance. For the UN, Switzerland is not just a host country. It is our good partner and supporter for more than half a century. With this in mind I would like to outline the major recent developments at the Geneva UN Headquarters with the hope that this will help you to better understand what we are doing here and what role the UN is playing in this city.

To begin with, I would like to stress that "Geneva International" is unique in many respects. The birth place of the first international organization, the League of Nations, in which Switzerland played an active role, Geneva is now the second largest UN center in the world. While New York is preoccupied mainly with political deliberations and acts as well in strategic decision-making, Geneva

performs other functions within the UN system. It is the organization's largest center for conference diplomacy, which is often referred to as parliamentary diplomacy, the main center for operational activities and the principal repository of social, economic and technological "know-how".

To illustrate the scope of UN activities in Geneva I would like to give you some figures. Currently Geneva hosts five specialized UN agencies (International Labour Organization, International Telecommunication Union, World Health Organization, World Intellectual Property Organization, and World Meteorological Organization), thirteen other major UN entities (among them the UN Office at Geneva (UNOG), Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UN Conference on Trade and Development, Economic Commission for Europe and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights), plus 15 other organizations and programmes represented at UNOG. There are also about twenty big international entities in Geneva that do not belong to the UN system, for example, CERN, World Trade Organization or International Standards Organization.

Diplomatic representation in Geneva is one of the biggest in the world and approximately 30,000 people living in this city have diplomatic passports. There are three diplomatic corps - diplomats who work with the UN proper, those accredited to the Conference on Disarmament and those accredited to the World Trade Organization. There are currently 151 permanent missions of member states, 3 observer missions, and 6 observer bureaux with a total of 166 ambassadors accredited to UNOG. 14 states maintain separate missions to the Conference on Disarmament and 17 states to the WTO.

An important feature of Geneva is the considerable presence of such non-traditional actors as non-governmental organizations, which are playing an increasingly active role in international affairs. 1833 NGOs are accredited to UNOG, 236 of which maintain permanent offices in this city. Most of these organizations are attracted to Geneva by the UN activities related to human rights and disarmament.

The work of the UN organizations in Geneva is covered in the mass media by 250 permanently accredited journalists. During important international events the number of media representatives usually increases by up to one thousand people.

In financial terms the biannual budget of UNOG is more than 300 million dollars. The annual turnover of the whole Geneva International is about 5 billion Swiss francs.

### **Geneva as the Center of Conference Diplomacy**

Every year UNOG services 7,500 international conferences and meetings. They range from technical sessions to assemblies and negotiations on major political issues. Recently the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council held two meetings in Geneva at the ministerial level. The number of meetings held in Geneva is almost double the number held in New York at UN Headquarters. I would say that in Geneva the number of international conferences per capita is higher than in any other city in the world. UNOG translates about 146,000 pages of documentation into the six official languages and distributes 17 million documents. Some 80,000 people from all over the world attend meetings at the

Palais des Nations every year.

Many people ask themselves if it is justified to maintain such a substantive negotiating machinery. The United Nations is sometimes accused of talking more than doing, or of being too slow. Indeed the number of meetings it organizes is impressive. However, this is the only way to meet the technological, economic and social challenges of our time through the agreed actions of its 185 member states. Such actions are imperative since the world is becoming increasingly interdependent and there are more and more global problems that no single country can solve on its own. The UN is building bridges among nations and as the people of Geneva know very well, to build a bridge sometimes takes quite a bit of time. What is also important is that the UN is always on the move. It may be slow but it never stops and it makes things happen.

The strengthening of international cooperation is not a luxury, but a necessity. Most of the meetings are aimed at identifying the global problems and building consensus among the membership with regard to these problems which include, in particular, disarmament, human rights, humanitarian assistance, health, ecology, communications, business-labour relations etc.

Consensus provides the basis for norm-setting. Even purely technical norms which go somewhat unnoticed in the media, have great impact on the everyday life of millions of citizens. Many people do not realize that when they are making international phone calls or receiving television and radio programmes from other countries, this was made possible because the International Telecommunications Union, the UN specialized agency, has developed appropriate international



telecommunications standards. When an epidemic occurs and vaccines are immediately delivered to the endangered country - it happens because this work is coordinated by the World Health Organization. In all the countries of the world people now have short- and long-term weather forecasts because nations can share their information and cooperate through the World Meteorological Organization and use this agency's computer facilities to process meteorological data. In other words, the orderly manner in which the processes of globalization and integration in the modern world are developing is to a large extent the result of the UN's coordination and norm-setting activities and much of this work is done in this city.

### **Geneva as an Operational Center**

In the field of operational activities Geneva concentrates on five major fields. Their common denominators are preventive and peace building actions which aim at strengthening and solidifying peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict. Firstly, there is the promotion of human rights and humanitarian assistance which is dealt with by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. They are working in close cooperation with other Geneva-based international organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Organization for Migration, etc.

As for the humanitarian issues, Geneva provides assistance to countries in need, and within the context of this work disaster relief occupies an important place. The role of these bodies is difficult to overestimate. For example, there are currently more than 22 million refugees in the world, of which 6 million in

Europe. If it was not for the relief work of UNHCR, its resettlement policy and the international norms it has developed, some countries would be simply overwhelmed by the flows of millions of people across the borders, with the resulting international disputes and grave social and economic consequences both for the receiving countries and for the refugees.

In this connection I would like to mention that in 1999 the international community will celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Geneva Conventions which, together with the Hague Conventions adopted a century ago, laid the foundations of international humanitarian law. This will offer a good opportunity to intensify efforts to promote humanitarian law and humanitarian values worldwide, as well as to strengthen the traditional and well deserved image of Geneva as the birthplace and major international center of humanitarianism.

Secondly, Geneva is heavily involved in economic, trade and development activities. The UN Office at Geneva is the home to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which interacts with the World Trade Organization through the International Trade Center (ITC) as well as the Economic Commission for Europe. All of these institutions play a significant role in their particular area of expertise.

Every two years, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations holds its substantive session in Geneva. The theme of the 1997 session, the most recent one to be held in Geneva, was fostering an "enabling environment for development". The recently completed four-week negotiations during this session have demonstrated that some progress for the creation of a framework for

international cooperation and national policies was made. It was stressed that international cooperation and partnership have a vital role to play in building a favorable climate in which capital flows, investment and trade can flourish.

A consensus was reached that the broad elements of an enabling environment for development include, in particular, the creation and maintenance of stable international conditions; democratization in international relations in accordance with the UN Charter and international law; establishment of an open, rule-based equitable, secure, non-discriminatory, transparent and predictable multilateral trading system; and support for the weakest and most vulnerable members of the international community through more favorable treatment in trade and finance.

Thirdly, Geneva hosts the largest number of UN agencies dealing with science and technology. Among them are, the International Telecommunications Union, which is responsible for ensuring cooperation in the rational use and improvement of telecommunications of all kind; the World Meteorological Organization that promotes the worldwide exchange and use of meteorological and hydrological information and the World Health Organization which, among other things, promotes research on a wide range of issues such as immunization and drug and food safety standards.

Fourthly, Geneva makes a considerable contribution to the peace and security activities of the United Nations, primarily through the work of its Conference on Disarmament. This Conference is “the single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum of the international community”, which means that it is the only international body where states not only discuss disarmament but actually

negotiate international treaties. The Conference has already developed such major multilateral arms limitation and disarmament agreements as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the Convention on the Prohibition of Military Use of Environmental Modification Techniques, the seabed treaties, the Convention on the Prohibition of Biological Weapons, the Convention on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. Just recently, on 11 August, the Conference decided to start negotiations on the ban of the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons, and to create for this purpose an Ad Hoc Committee.

Finally, the UN in Geneva is active in the field of research and training. There are three United Nations research and training organizations here - the UN Institute for Disarmament Research, the UN Research Institute for Social Development and the UN Institute for Training and Research. A similar organization is located in neighboring Italy - the UN Staff College in Torino. Plans are now being discussed to bring them closer to each other so that these institutions better complement their activities with the aim of providing their facilities in a most efficient way, both to the UN and to its member states.

As for UNOG per se, which I am responsible for supervising, it now acts as one within and across the diverse UN activities in Geneva. It has several major functions: firstly, to service conferences which I have already mentioned; secondly, to provide administrative services to the numerous UN organizations in Geneva and some other duty stations; and thirdly to provide information about the UN both to journalists and to the public.

## **Geneva as a Repository of Knowledge**

Perhaps one of the most important roles which the UN in Geneva is beginning to play, is that of repository of knowledge, a sort of “pool” of expertise for its membership. The UN agencies have accumulated a great deal of information in the fields with which they are dealing and this knowledge is of considerable value to the member states, in particular those which are in the process of social or economic transformation. Figuratively speaking the UN lacks hardware, but has plenty of good software. It should perhaps make a deal with Microsoft to learn how to make a profit from it.

Nevertheless, it is not a coincidence that an increasing number of heads of states and governments as well as other senior officials, are coming to Geneva not just to make speeches at prestigious conferences, but also to meet with the heads of the UN agencies and programmes. Thus, in 1996 UNOG was visited by 8 presidents, 7 prime-ministers and 144 ministers. In 1997 we welcomed here 3 heads of states, 3 heads of governments and 42 ministers. This year Geneva was visited, among others, by Bill Clinton, Nelson Mandella and Fidel Castro. As one of the visiting presidents said: “in case you have a problem, there is no need to reinvent the wheel, better go to the UN”.

## **UNOG Reform**

UNOG, like the whole United Nations system, is now in the process of transformation. The comprehensive reform of the UN has been the declared priority of the Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, ever since he took office in

January 1997 and on 16 July that year he announced his practical proposals for reform.

These proposals contain the most extensive and far-reaching reform plan in the 52-year history of our Organization. Their aim is simple. To transform the Organization. To bring greater unity of purpose, greater coherence of efforts, and greater agility in responding to an increasingly dynamic and complex world, to make the Organization more effective and efficient.

Reform efforts have been undertaken at UNOG since 1994, and they are now placed in a broader context. In particular they envisage more delegation of authority from New York Headquarters to Geneva; consolidation of activities in the five traditional priority fields; strengthening cooperation among the organizations of the UN system in particular in providing so called "common services" that will help to reduce costs; and more active promotion of technological innovation. The reform plans include measures to simplify rules and procedures and to improve the quality of training and re-training of the staff. These efforts are accompanied by some painful but unavoidable administrative measures - the reduction of the budget and abolition of some 250 posts. At the same time, as the result of the consolidation strategy, some offices like UNOPS, have been transferred to Geneva.

The reform cannot happen overnight. In fact, in my opinion, the reform should be a continuous process, and the organization should be constantly adjusting its priorities and methods of work to the rapidly changing international environment. From the point of view of the substance of our work at UNOG the reform has

renewed, revitalized and reinvigorated the role of Geneva within the UN system. More than that, its role has further expanded.

Due to the delegation of authority, UNOG has considerably strengthened its ties with the European and some non-European regional organizations. For example, five years ago UNOG suggested to the Council of Europe and to the CSCE that meetings be held between the three organizations on a regular basis, to improve coordination, cooperation and the sharing of information on political and human dimensional problems. Since then the "Tripartite process", as it is called, has proven to be useful in establishing new channels of communication as well as in revealing and bridging differences in institutional cultures. In view of its positive results in the humanitarian field it was agreed to include economic and social issues in the consultative process. In recent years the original tripartite participants had been joined by nine other UN and non-UN organizations including the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Last year an important development occurred when the participants decided to develop joint electronic databases. The first such database on the humanitarian situation in the Caucasus has already been implemented.

As a parallel development we have considerably improved our cooperation with the East European regional organizations, in particular the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation. A substantive dialogue is also developing between UNOG, Organization of the Islamic Conference and the Organization of African Unity.



Another important addition to our mandate is the work with parliaments, and , in particular, a closer cooperation with the Inter-Parliamentary Union whose Secretariat is based in Geneva. We have agreed with IPU that UNOG will help it to provide information to parliamentarians about the UN.

UNOG has also begun to cooperate with the newly created World Secretariat of Cities and Local Government, which is the union of ten major international or regional associations of cities and local authorities. Established following the UN HABITAT II Conference held in Istanbul in June 1996, its aim is to strengthen the voice of cities and local authorities on the international stage, in particular to play an active part in the policy formation bodies of the UN. It is too based in Geneva.

With the creation of an integrated network of UN research and training institutions and programmes in Geneva, we plan eventually to invite the Geneva-based Swiss and international institutions to join our common effort, to add a new dimension to the Geneva International and to create a center of intellectual activity both in geopolitical and geo-economic fields.

### **UNOG and Switzerland**

One of my primary responsibilities as UNOG Director-General is to maintain relations between the UN and the authorities of the host country. I am quite satisfied with our cooperation. I have frequent meetings with the authorities of both the city and the canton of Geneva as well as with the Federal Government, and our discussions are consistently friendly and productive.

Switzerland is not yet a member of the UN, but it is actively participating in the work of some of the UN bodies and providing considerable support to the World Organization. For example, in 1997 Switzerland contributed 13,4 million francs to various UN programmes, in particular UNHCR and the World Food Programme. In April, the Swiss authorities opened the Center for Humanitarian De-mining in Geneva, the work of which will be of considerable help to the UN humanitarian organizations. June saw the opening of the Palais Wilson and the signing of the agreement on the transfer of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights there. I would especially like to express my gratitude to Ambassador Gyger for his contribution to the positive outcome of these negotiations.

In 1996 Switzerland became a member of the Conference on Disarmament which Ambassador Hofer recently chaired with great success. Some prominent Swiss diplomats and lawyers have also provided their services to the UN.

Sometimes when I talk to people outside Switzerland it is difficult to explain why this country, the name of which is so closely associated with the history of internationalism and which is so heavily involved with the UN, is not among its members. We in the United Nations look forward to the day - hopefully sooner rather than later - when the Swiss flag will take its rightful place alongside those of the other 185 Member states.

Our policy towards the people of Geneva has always been one of friendliness and openness. I think that there should be no difference between rive droit and rive gauche. The Palais des Nations is open to the public. In fact our ambition is to

transform it into one of the many cultural centers of this city. Art - this is what created the culture of peace. We now hold annually about 40 arts exhibitions which are open to all. Our intention is to organize a massive cultural and artistic event in the year 2000, as a joint venture with the city and canton of Geneva in order to mark the turn of the century.

Of course there are some issues in our relations which still need to be considered, but I am confident that all problems will be resolved to mutual satisfaction. From the UN point of view two issues are of major concern. Firstly, are difficulties faced by the missions of the least developed countries. Although this dilemma exists in many UN duty stations, in Geneva it is particularly acute due to the high cost of living. Some of these missions can barely make ends meet, which of course seriously hampers their ability to perform their duties. Support from Switzerland could considerably help to improve the situation.

Another priority problem is related to security. Following the recent, widely publicized manifestations around and inside the Palais des Nations, the diplomatic community is increasingly concerned about its security. Some diplomats are complaining loudly, thus damaging the image of Geneva as a safe place for international interactions. I believe that with the continued help and more active involvement of the authorities of the host country we will be able to solve this problem.

Summing up, I would like to say that international organizations have contributed significantly to the identity of Geneva as a leading city in world affairs, and they also play an important role in the local economy. On its part the United Nations

has benefitted considerably from the support and hospitality of the people of Switzerland which is well-known and highly appreciated at the United Nations. As a result, a mutually beneficial synergy has emerged and it provides a sound base for Geneva within the UN system.

In conclusion I would like to emphasize that the acceleration of change in the world requires new ways of solving problems. We cannot afford to waste time anymore. Even the best idea will be useless if we wait too long with its implementation. It is important not only to understand what and how to do, but also to act as quickly as possible. This is the most reliable way for further strengthening the role of Geneva as one of the major UN Headquarters in the new global political and economic environment.

Thank you for your attention.