

Geneva International : Retrospect and Prospect
**Celebration of the 80th Anniversary of the decision to declare Geneva
the seat of the League of Nations (29 April, 1919)**

**Speech by
Vladimir Petrovsky
Under Secretary General
Director General of the United Nations Office at Geneva
Secretary General of the Conference on Disarmament
UNOG Library, 23 April, 1999**

Ms. President,
Mr. Mayor,
Ambassador,
Distinguished guests,

I am very pleased to be here today to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the decision to make Geneva the seat of the League of Nations. At the turn of the century, when our minds are increasingly focussed on what the future will bring, we cannot help but reflect on what brought us here. It is in this vein that I would like to talk to you today about Geneva as an international centre for diplomacy.

The delegates of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 understood very well the value of neutrality. Nestled at the heart of Europe, Geneva was an ideal setting for a new international organization to put down its roots. Switzerland's reputation for neutrality, dating back as far as the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, was an important factor in the delegates' decision. Geneva was also a more palatable solution than many of the other candidates in the political tug of war for the right to host the organization. The Great War had devastated most of the continent of Europe, but had left Geneva relatively unscathed. Neutrality had kept Geneva safe from the horrors of the first World War and made it an appropriate host to the movement for lasting peace and the prevention of future conflicts. This international character is very much present today and contributes to Geneva's reputation as an important forward-looking global centre for multilateral diplomacy.

The League of Nations was the product of a dream for a better world. The League owed its existence to the perseverance of a few key individuals, most notably President Woodrow Wilson of the United States. A stately and intellectual man with a resolute political conscience, President Wilson understood that for peace to reign in the wake of war, common ethical values and standards for justice must be allowed to permeate the lives of individuals and the affairs of state. Woodrow Wilson laid the foundation for a League of Nations in his famous "14 points", which became the guidelines for an eventual charter based on the principles of mutual respect among countries, big and small, and the primordial value of peace.

While the League of Nations did not achieve many of its objectives, this had more to do with its lack of universality, the traumatic and lingering effects of the Great War and the dramatic events that soon followed, than with any shortcoming of those who worked hard to see it succeed. One of the lessons learned from the experience of the League of Nations is that for multilateral diplomacy to function well, it must benefit from the broadest possible involvement. This was not the case for the League and ultimately led to its demise.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of multilateral diplomacy, the League of Nations had an important impact. It is often forgotten that the League of Nations was founded on the principles of peacemaking and collective security. Though the latter term came to be coined a decade later, the spirit of these principles can be found throughout the League's Covenant. The Covenant formulated the parameters for addressing many of the larger issues still of concern today, such as the protection of human rights, refugees and the prevention of disputes through impartial judicial procedures. The reach of the Covenant through time has been extensive. The Covenant has opened new vistas for ^{multilateral} international diplomacy and endeavoured for international peace when peace by consensus was still only a concept.

In practical terms, the classic legal trio of peaceful settlement of disputes - conciliation, arbitration, and adjudication - grew under the League and proved to be a successful method of peace-making. The League of Nations experience in the field of disarmament (the Mixed Commission in 1921-24, the Preparatory Committee for Disarmament Conference in 1925-30

and the Disarmament Conference itself, in 1931-37), has been the subject of an extensive survey of the UN Committee of Twelve in 1951. This survey contributed tremendously to a fuller understanding at the UN of the task of disarmament and of the difficulties with which efforts towards disarmament are faced.

Speaking about the heritage of the League of Nations, I cannot but note the very constructive participation of Switzerland in the work of the League, from its inception.

The United Nations, the successor to the League, was built on much the same foundation as its predecessor, and benefited, from the very beginning, from a strong legacy of internationalism for which Geneva was known. One great defect of the League, namely, its lack of universal membership including all of the world's great powers, has been remedied by the fact that at the birth of the United Nations, the United States, the USSR and China were members of the new organization.

The presence of the League of Nations and the UN office and specialized agencies has solidified this city's reputation as one of the major centres of multilateralism. The match of the UN international organizations and Geneva has been so successful over the years due to a unity of purpose and a common vision of democratic peace, humanism and responsibility in world affairs.

At the dawn of the 21st Century, we can say with confidence that Geneva is greatly influenced by the effects of globalization and the notions of international diplomacy both in material and diplomatic terms. On a macroeconomic scale, the international community represents an influx of some 5 billion Swiss francs into this tranquil city. Every year, UNOG services roughly 7,500 international conferences and meetings and welcomes some 80,000 delegates from around the world. However, Geneva is much more than a centre for conference diplomacy, it is also a unique repository of expertise and knowledge in international standards. Geneva is also a living model of international cooperation in action. For example, the UN

humanitarian bodies in Geneva are capable of mobilising vast resources on very short notice to address immediate and longer-term needs of the victims of disasters and crises.

In the field of operational activities, traditionally strong in Geneva, the reform of the UN undertaken by the Secretary General brings further consolidation in five major areas: the promotion of human rights and humanitarian assistance; trade and development; science and technology; disarmament negotiation and research and training. New offices of the UN family have been established here in Geneva, such as the Rehabilitation and Social Sustainability Unit of the UN Office for Project Services which focuses on executing projects with cross-cutting and holistic approaches to rehabilitation and sustainable development.

Geneva is also one of the few crucial centres for interaction between global and regional structures. The tripartite consultative process between the UNOG, the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe is just one example. The search for and harmonization of strategies to achieve peace and security is the major aim of cooperation between the UN and regional structures.

The reforms of the Secretary General are transforming the Organization's capacity to adapt to new realities, new emerging circumstances and new international ~~actions~~. The UN bodies in Geneva, as in New York and elsewhere, have streamlined their activities to run smoother programmes and deliver better services to Member States. This ^{new} approach should allow UNOG to remain at the cutting-edge of peace-building and negotiating practices and ensure that wealth of knowledge and expertise in Geneva is as up-to-date as possible.

I deeply believe that a strong, international Geneva will help usher in a century more peaceful than the last, and build a brighter future for all the people of the United Nations.

In conclusion, I wish to extend a word of thanks to the Director-General of the ILO, Mr. Somavia, for the contribution of his Organization to this exhibition.
Thank you for your attention.