

48th jUNe Day Celebration Ceremony
Address by Ms. Patricia O' Brien
Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs
The Legal Counsel
29 June 2013, 10:00 am, Saugatuck Elementary School
Westport, Connecticut

President Hass,
Ambassador Reed
Colleagues and Friends,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here in Westport today, to mark the 48th jUNe Day Celebration. Thank you for inviting me to celebrate this long-standing tradition with you. In particular, I would like to thank the UN Association of Southwestern Connecticut and the International Visitors Committee for making today possible. And thank you all for making me feel so welcome. [Westport is a beautiful place. There must be something special in the name. Because there is a wonderful town in my country, Ireland, which shares the same name and which, last year, was voted the best place to live in Ireland.]

If I may, I want particularly to thank my UN colleague and friend, Ambassador Joseph Verner Reed, for the part he played in inviting me to join you. Ambassador Reed brings extraordinary energy and commitment to everything he does. His wise advice

has been well received by Secretaries-General for decades. His long held view that the world is interdependent has never been truer than today.

jUNe Day is important as it commemorates the signing of the United Nations Charter on June 26, 1945, a momentous day in world history. It encourages international understanding by creating friendly interaction between local people and visitors from the UN. The UN is grateful to you for your unwavering commitment and support.

I have the great honour and pleasure to deliver a message from the Secretary-General, Mr. BAN Ki-moon, and then I will say a few words in my capacity as Legal Counsel of the Secretary-General:

The Secretary-General has asked me to convey the following message to you:

"I am pleased to send warm greetings to all colleagues participating in jUNe Day 2013.

I express my warmest appreciation to the organizers, especially Ambassador Joseph Verner Reed, who has consistently devoted himself forging ties between the UN family, the diplomatic community and our gracious local hosts.

Today's activities are more than a spirited get together. They are a valuable opportunity for participants to strengthen bonds of friendship. They are a chance to learn more about each other. And they are a celebration of our diversity.

Right now, the United Nations is engaged in accelerating our efforts to reach the Millennium Development Goals while holding wide-ranging consultations on the post-2015 development agenda.

At the same time, we are working to address pressing crises, especially the devastating conflict in Syria. An estimated 93,000 people have died in just over two years. I have repeatedly emphasized that there is no military solution, and continue to push for a negotiated transition. At the same time, the United Nations is carrying out life-saving humanitarian relief operations.

jUNe Day is a brief respite from your efforts to address the grave problems on the international agenda. The United Nations has been entrusted with responding to poverty, conflicts, human rights violations and other global threats. Each of you plays an essential role in our response. I hope that today will be an inspiring reminder

of the importance of our work and the solidarity of colleagues with whom we are privileged to serve.

Thank you.”

And now, allow me to say a few words in my capacity as Legal Counsel of the United Nations.

I will tell you a little about myself. I am from Ireland where, before I took up my position as UN Legal Counsel, I had been legal adviser at the foreign ministry. In many respects, I was an outsider – from a small and very committed member state - looking in on how this vast and complex body worked. Naturally, this only allowed for a fleeting glimpse at most of the issues, or, for a very concentrated focus on an issue of particular national importance.

While some critics might accuse the Organisation of being anachronistic, or lacking in the political and material means to carry out essential tasks, it is crucial to remember just how important the UN is for so many States. In this respect, I am reminded of Adlai Stevenson’s comment that “the whole basis of the United Nations is the right of all nations - great or small - to have weight, to have a vote, to be attended to ...” Many States are small or developing and do not have the advantage of coming from a stable region with well established regional and institutional arrangements. The bulk of the States at the UN -

with all that this implies - are small. The UN allows them an opportunity to be seen and heard, which they might not otherwise receive.

And, of course, your country, the United States, plays a pivotal role at the United Nations.

The United Nations and United States share common goals – peace and security, human rights and development.

In that regard, as the Secretary-General told President Obama in the Oval Office in April, the strong leadership, cooperation and support of the US Government is essential and appreciated.

The American people care about the world – justice, freedom and opportunity for all.

We are greatly encouraged that the partnership between the United Nations and the United States is very solid and strong. The support of people such as you is an intrinsic part of this partnership

Much of the UN's work is carried out quietly and at some risk to the lives of UN staff. Much of this work is incremental and might not cause the needle of public opinion to move wildly. However, it can have a profoundly positive impact on the lives of individuals and communities all across the world.

My aim – like that of outstanding groups such as the UN Association of Southwestern Connecticut – is to bring home the message of the United Nations.

Every day, we feed over 90 million people.

We keep the peace with 110,000 peacekeepers around the world in 15 operations and are engaged in peacemaking and peacebuilding through more than a dozen special political missions.

We deliver humanitarian aid to the toughest places.

We vaccinate almost 60 percent of the world's children.

We combat poverty and climate change and support elections in some 50 countries a year.

And we push for human rights and quality education.

Support such as yours helps to deliver all this and more.

You should feel very proud of this shared effort to advance our common values.

This sense of purpose and solidarity has never been more needed.

We face trying, turbulent times.

Some call the position of UN Secretary-General the most impossible job on earth.

There are 193 countries – with many different interests pushing in many different directions.

But he does not see this job as mission impossible. Instead, he sees the many possibilities.

Country after country, leader after leader, is recognizing that we can only tackle our challenges by taking them on together.

No nation, no region, no group can do it alone.

This is the UN moment.

But making the most of it won't just happen by itself.

We have to make it happen.

The world is changing – dramatically and rapidly.

New economic powers are rising.

New threats have emerged -- climate change above all.

And the human family has a new profile: more than half the earth's people are under the age of 25.

Your challenge, ours together, is to shape this new world for the better -- to build a landscape of peace while conquering the persistent problems of old: poverty, hunger and hatred.

We have seen countries that were once battlefields begin to find stability and a place in the global economy.

We have seen old foes reconcile, finding that there is more that unites than divides them.

We have seen people and groups and companies and foundations come together behind global causes -- vaccines for children, HIV treatment, democracy and disarmament.

Such gains, movements and transformations do not just happen. They are made possible by people who create something, who donate something, who reach out, who think beyond themselves to the greater world of human need and aspiration.

People like you – who, in whatever way possible, large or small, you can engage.

Because engaging can - and does - make a difference.

In this respect, it is worth recalling the truly transformative experience of the UN Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon.

He often recounts his experience of life as a young boy in the 1950s in the aftermath of the Korean war. His words are those of someone who knows better than most the value of education and who, as a result, is especially strongly committed to doing all he can to bring its benefits to as many people as possible.

He recently said and I quote: "Education has shaped my life and the history of my country. I grew up in a society ravaged by war and mired in poverty. Schools had been destroyed. My classes

were held in the open under a tree. We had no desks, chairs or other basic necessities. The Republic of Korea was on its knees, but education enabled the country to stand tall again. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other international partners provided books and school supplies to help pave the road to recovery. Someone provided me with a textbook to help me to learn. At the back of this book it said words that I will never forget: 'Please study hard, because UNESCO has given you this book.' I will never forget the hope that these basic tools gave us."

Such personal experience speaks loudly of what the UN can do.

Sometimes my own personal daily experience at work also reminds me very starkly of the work we do and why we do it.

This occurred to me in a small personal way during one of my first overseas missions as UN Legal Counsel.

I was taught my manners growing up. Always be polite. Please and thank you. And always take the hand of someone who extends theirs. I thought about that when I travelled to Rwanda almost four years ago.

Before I joined the UN, I had read "Shake Hands with the Devil," the compelling memoir by General Roméo Dallaire, the Force

Commander of the UN peacekeeping operation in Rwanda, about his experience during the genocide.

General Dallaire described how, "In just 100 days, over 800,000 innocent Rwandan men, women and children were brutally murdered while the developed world ... sat back and watched the unfolding apocalypse or simply changed channels."

This indifference allowed the génocidaires to rain so much bloodshed on Rwanda that the rivers overflowed with dead bodies.

When I arrived at the UN Rwanda Tribunal fifteen years later, the government officials took me to the prison. This is customary to show that conditions are humane and comply with international standards.

And so, I found myself face to face with one of the suspected war criminals at the door of his cell.

He reached out his hand to shake mine.

What should I do?

I had never refused anyone's hand in my life.

Part of me thought - and my instinct impelled me - to go with the flow.

It was not for me to forgive, but forgiveness is part of our credo and a way of moving forward.

It is not as though anyone would have known the difference. Shaking his hand would have resolved an awkward social moment.

But it would have created a much bigger problem. It would have haunted my conscience.

I do not pretend it was brave to refuse his hand. I do not say I was right or wrong. I am just very glad I did not shake his hand.

He was later convicted of genocide.

In this regard – the pursuit of international criminal justice and the ending of impunity – have been vital parts of the work of my office. Yes, the process of justice is slow. Yes, it is financially expensive. But, the international criminal tribunals have not been the empty gesture of a powerless or indifferent international community. Instead, they have been the successful pioneers in the search for justice in the aftermath of dreadful crimes. We have seen major political leaders brought before these tribunals – and successfully prosecuted. I truly believe that the judgments of the tribunals are having – and will have - an effect to make others think twice before they commit these war crimes.

I will conclude my remarks here.

Please allow me to again express my gratitude, and the gratitude of the Secretary-General, for your tireless support for the UN and for hosting this fantastic event for the 48th year running. In celebrating the signing of the UN Charter you are promoting the fundamental objectives of the UN: the maintenance of international peace and security; the development of friendly relations among nations; and international cooperation and respect for human rights. The UN is grateful to you for championing these values.

Thank you.