

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

**MESSAGE AT THE OPENING OF THE HIGH-LEVEL
POLITICAL CONFERENCE FOR THE PURPOSE OF SIGNING THE
UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION AGAINST CORRUPTION**

Merida, Mexico, 9 December 2003

Delivered by Mr. Hans Corell, Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs

Corruption is an insidious scourge that impoverishes many countries, and affects us all. The signing of this Convention is a major victory in our struggle against it. Each year, this day will be celebrated as the United Nations Day against Corruption.

We have come a long way. Until the early 1990s, corruption was hardly ever mentioned in official circles, although everybody knew it was there. It took great efforts and perseverance by many people to raise awareness of the corrosive effects of corruption on societies, and to put the fight against this plague on the global agenda.

It is now widely understood that corruption undermines economic performance, weakens democratic institutions and the rule of law, disrupts social order and destroys public trust, thus allowing organized crime, terrorism, and other threats to human security to flourish.

No country – rich or poor – is immune to this evil phenomenon. Both public and private sectors are involved. And it is always the public good that suffers.

But corruption hurts poor people in developing countries disproportionately. It affects their daily life in many different ways, and tends to make them even poorer, by denying them their rightful share of economic resources or life-saving aid.

Corruption puts basic public services beyond the reach of those who cannot afford to pay bribes. By diverting scarce resources intended for development, corruption also makes it harder to meet fundamental needs such as those for food, health and education. It creates discrimination between the different groups in society, feeds inequality and injustice, discourages foreign investment and aid, and hinders growth. It is, therefore, a major obstacle to political stability, and to successful social and economic development.

Our only hope of removing this obstacle is through the effective application of the rule of law. Let me congratulate the many governments that have already adopted national legislation against corruption. Of course, this does not make the new Convention less important. Criminals have wasted no time in embracing today's globalized economy and the sophisticated technology that goes with it. Up to now, our efforts to combat them have been fragmentary. But now the Merida Convention, together with another landmark instrument – the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which entered into force a little more than two months ago – gives us the tools to address crime and corruption on a global scale.

With improved international cooperation, we can have an impact on criminal operations worldwide. That may sound self-evident. But we have been able to agree on this new Convention only through very difficult negotiations, which have lasted two years. I congratulate the negotiators on their achievement in producing an instrument that is balanced, strong and pragmatic.

The Convention makes clear that eradicating corruption is a responsibility of States, and it offers them a comprehensive set of standards that they can apply to strengthen their regulatory regimes and institutions.

Let me stress in particular the provisions on asset recovery – the first of their kind – which require Member States to return assets obtained through corruption to the country from which they were stolen. This is a major breakthrough. It will help tackle a pressing problem for many developing countries, where corrupt elites have looted billions of dollars that are now desperately needed by new governments to redress the social and economic damage inflicted on their societies.

The Convention also makes clear that in order to succeed in our efforts to eradicate corruption, the support and the involvement of civil society, including the private sector, are crucial. I am particularly encouraged that it includes measures to promote the transparency and accountability of the international business community.

My Global Compact can play an active role in helping to implement the new Convention. Practical measures to fight corruption are already an integral part of many approaches developed under its umbrella. The Compact is organizing an international dialogue on Transparency and Anti-Corruption to be held in January in Paris, and we are planning a Summit of Global Compact Leaders in June 2004 in New York. As we move forward, I hope that we will find practical ways for business and other non-state actors to become active champions in the fight against corruption.

Let me add that the United Nations itself has launched an Organizational Integrity Initiative to reinforce integrity as a core value within the Organization, and to ensure that we practice what we preach. The Initiative is rooted in my determination to strengthen overall transparency and accountability in the Organization, and to make the United Nations a more effective instrument in the service of the peoples of the world.

Our greatest challenge today is to ensure that people everywhere can live in dignity, free from poverty, hunger, violence, oppression and injustice. For many people in a corrupt society, these freedoms remain only a dream.

I urge all States to ratify the Convention at the earliest possible date. Let us bring it into force as a matter of urgency. If fully enforced, it can help to ensure that the weak and vulnerable are protected from the greed of corrupt officials and unscrupulous profiteers. It can help ensure that, in today's fast-moving world, the poor do not become poorer. And by removing an important obstacle to development, it can help us achieve the Millennium Development Goals, and improve the life of millions around the world. Let me assure you that the United Nations will continue to do its part, working with Governments and civil society in this momentous global struggle.

I would like to express my appreciation to the Government of Mexico, and to the Municipality and people of Merida for hosting this momentous event. I would also like to thank all of you who are participating in this conference. By being here, you are sending a clear message that the international community is determined to fight corruption, and that betrayal of the public trust will no longer be tolerated.

Thank you very much.