

Comfort Ero
UNA-UK, United Nations Day Reception

24 October 2023

Good evening,

It is with deep humility and pride that I accept the 2023 Sir Brian Urquhart Award for Distinguished Service to the UN.

I want to thank you, Baroness Anelay, as well as the UNA-UK Board of Directors, UNA-UK staff and the members of this esteemed association, for this honour.

And I am deeply grateful to the Embassy of Switzerland for hosting this gathering. Crisis Group has been pleased to work very closely with Switzerland in the immediate runup to and during its UN Security Council term.

Many of you will know me for my work with the International Crisis Group, with which I have spent much of the past two decades.

Our organisation was founded in 1995, emerging at a moment of reflection about how to better ensure international peace and security. Fresh off the atrocities that unfolded in Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda, there was a clear demand for organisations that could help give life to the mantra, “Never again”.

As a conflict prevention organisation, Crisis Group’s mandate is closely aligned with the UN’s peace and security efforts worldwide. Through field-based research, sharp analysis and high-level advocacy, we aim to provide policymakers with practical recommendations to help prevent and resolve deadly conflicts.

We monitor developments in over 70 countries worldwide. Many of our analysts maintain close contact with UN officials on the ground. We also have a dedicated advocacy office for the UN, which helps us bridge our research and analysis with the debates that unfold in New York.

In fact, in accepting this award, I follow in the footsteps of two members of Crisis Group’s Board of Trustees: Zeinab Badawi, who received it in 2020, and Maria Fernanda Espinosa, who got the honour one year later.

Having worn many hats at Crisis Group, as project director for West Africa, as director of our Africa program and now as President, I have witnessed the UN’s strengths and shortcomings firsthand.

It is hard to tell my professional story without starting at UNA-UK. My journey – particularly how I became intrigued with the UN’s role in global affairs – began precisely 30 years ago as an intern at 3 Whitehall Court, London, home of UNA-UK. And it’s great to see my former boss, Sam Daws, here with us today. We met on the train going to the British International Studies Association conference. I explained to Sam that I was interested in international relations – in understanding relations between states and the idea of a society of states. He told me to join him at the UNA to see if those ideas could be further refined.

Thank you, Sam, for opening the door to the start of my journey and for providing me with a foundation for shaping the ideals I had then about global governance, diplomacy and conflict resolution.

I am proud to hold the title – admittedly a self-granted one – of UNA-UK’s longest-serving intern, having interned with the association for nearly four years during my PhD.

My beginnings with UNA-UK were humble, as I originally came in once a week to cut press clippings about UN peacekeeping to help the team stay on top of the news. Over time, both Sam and his immediate successor, Josh Arnold-Forster, who is also here today, provided opportunities for me to write articles and participate in international conferences. I thank the UNA-UK for also contributing funds toward my dissertation field research. For a few years, I considered this internship my day job and my PhD an extracurricular activity.

I found a home at the UN Association, and my work there laid the foundation for the rest of my professional journey.

If my four years at UNA-UK incubated my professional journey, then my three years on the front lines as a UN peacekeeper in Liberia, from 2004 to 2007, accelerated it.

The mission, UNMIL, helped Liberia change its trajectory after a decade-long civil war. It was gratifying to have a front-row seat to observe not only the mission’s stabilising impact throughout the country, but also the real-time evolution of the UN’s flagship tool for international peace and security.

It was also satisfying to be at the table to help put into practice an idea that my colleagues in Crisis Group’s West Africa project had conceived: an International Contact Group for Liberia. In my capacity as a political officer, I watched Liberia’s partners in the Contact Group, including regional leaders and the UN, help oversee implementation of Liberia’s hard-won peace agreement. At Crisis Group, we had been advocating for this accord as well.

Before I joined the UN mission, I was the Project Director for Crisis Group in Freetown, Sierra Leone. There, I helped make the case for regional and international actors to come together in the form of a contact group to focus on Liberia. We saw a contact group as crucial not only for resolving Sierra Leone's civil war but also for addressing regional instability (neighbouring Guinea, a base for Liberian insurgents, was under stress and war had spread to Côte d'Ivoire). A holistic approach was needed. Liberia was the eye of a regional storm. Stability in Sierra Leone meant stabilising Liberia and the region. This required concerted regional and international engagement. And so we pushed for a contact group that would address these transnational conflicts. But we also saw the contact group as a way to close down forum shopping by Liberia's warring factions who were taking advantage of the fact that the region's various mediators had competing interests.

Ultimately this body was important in managing the varied interests of different external actors. To be at that table and watch how regional and international leaders eventually unified around Liberia's peace process, paving the way to elections and post-war recovery, shone a light on how peacekeeping is a careful balance of diplomacy and the use or the threat of force. There is no technical fix. But peacekeeping's success also required national leadership and ownership.

In some ways, UNMIL came to represent the ideals that Sir Brian Urquhart, for whom this award is named, envisioned nearly seventy-five years ago.

From the mid-1990s until very recently, we witnessed the UN's role in conflict management rapidly expand. UN-backed diplomacy and the organisation's blue helmet missions were standard tools in the international toolbox to help countries reach political settlements and stabilise after protracted armed conflicts.

But Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought with it considerable upheaval. It posed several serious questions about the global order, triggered a period of increased assertiveness from regional and middle powers, and sowed significant doubts about the multilateral institutions that oversee international peace and security.

In some of my previous speeches, including one that I delivered a year ago to ambassadors serving on the UN Security Council, I outlined how the world is confronting a "polycrisis" — a series of systemic, mutually reinforcing shocks (including climate change, economic distress and food insecurity) that intersect with a darkening geopolitical picture.

Similarly, countries around the world are now navigating a polycentric system of power. State-based power is growing more diffuse, and today's array of multilateral institutions — whether the UN, international financial institutions, or coalitions like the G20 or BRICS — do not fit together neatly.

The impact of these crises is all too clear at the UN. The diplomacy needed to test new ideas or forge political compromises is now much harder to come by.

Tensions in the UN Security Council are running high. As we at Crisis Group observed last month in our annual publication on the UN, the Security Council has been slow and indecisive in reacting to crises in 2023.

While diplomats were previously able to separate political sparring on Ukraine from the organisation's other business, they have found it harder to make compromises on difficult issues this year.

There are too many instances where the UN no longer serves as the world's preeminent chamber for multilateral diplomacy. From the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas to failed efforts to end the conflict in Sudan and the persistence of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, it is clear that the room for major-power cooperation in the Council has shrunk.

Similarly, the organisation's future as a player in international peace and security looks uncertain, as the era of large-scale stabilisation missions is coming to an end.

Mali's decision to expel the UN blue helmet mission this June, despite the likely risks of renewed violence, underlined the Council's weaknesses and the vulnerabilities of such missions. The Congolese government is charting a similar path to accelerate the end of nearly two decades of UN peacekeeping in the country.

But in spite of these challenges, we do not predict the death of the UN. In fact, Crisis Group is convinced that the organisation can still play a role in maintaining international peace and security even if the geopolitical picture remains bleak.

For all its flaws, the Security Council is still available as a rare space for the major powers to make compromises where their interests do align. Even those countries who opportunistically besmirch the organisation value the UN when they need to find common ground.

Progress requires the UN and its member states to continue pushing for the organisation to evolve, as it has so often done over the past 78 years.

I'd like to point out three ways that Crisis Group sees the UN's role evolving over the coming months.

First, the UN's relationship with the world is contingent on how it works with other organisations and coalitions of states.

Embracing this collaboration is key to the organisation's sustainability and evolution. We are seeing this most clearly when it comes to the decline of UN peacekeeping and the rise of other sorts of international security response.

Ad hoc interventions, such as the new UN-authorized mission to Haiti, are likely to fill the void left by blue helmet missions when support for them runs out. In parallel, diplomats at the Security Council and their counterparts at the African Union are debating whether, and how, to provide UN funding to African-led operations.

Though these arrangements are not without risk, they do demonstrate political solidarity and institutional creativity at this crucial moment when no organisation can tackle these challenges alone.

Secondly, the General Assembly and the Secretary-General should take on more proactive roles in guiding the multilateral system through periods of Security Council paralysis.

We are under no illusion that this will be easy considering the political challenges of big-power politics. But the UN, as the world's preeminent multilateral institution, should be prepared to take risks to defend the UN Charter.

Last year, countries in the General Assembly used the global forum to condemn Russia's war in Ukraine at a time when the Security Council could not.

Though the body's enthusiasm for discussing Ukraine has waned in recent months, diplomats are exploring how they can work creatively within their mandate to engage on some of the most intractable peace and security issues, particularly when the Council is gridlocked.

At this moment of Council tension, we have also seen Secretary-General Guterres rely on the UN's good offices to help countries reach limited political agreements.

Though he often turned to the organisation's humanitarian arm to lead in situations where the UN's political leverage was limited, his efforts on the Black Sea grain deal are among his most important achievements in the past year.

The Secretary-General's voice can be the organisation's most important asset. In some of the most difficult situations – when Russia launched its assault on Ukraine, when the Taliban retook Afghanistan or amid today's unprecedented fighting between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip – the Secretary-General has offered both moral clarity and a call to action that is much needed.

As world leaders prepare to choose Guterres' successor in just under two years' time, we implore countries to not lose sight of the role that the world's preeminent voice can play when other parts of the institution fall short.

This will also require an individual who can find political power in the crevices of crises and use all available assets to pursue peace.

And thirdly, the UN's effectiveness will depend considerably on how it evolves to tackle the defining challenges of our future.

UN diplomats have spent much of the past two years debating potential overhauls of the multilateral system. The Summit of the Future, set to take place next September in New York, is meant to be the culmination of these efforts.

Guterres has prepared eleven different policy briefs to support this reform process, ranging from preparing for future pandemics to reforming the governance of international financial institutions to better reflect the needs of poorer countries.

In one of these briefs, *The New Agenda for Peace*, Secretary-General presents a cautious and often humble reckoning of the UN's capacity to navigate the challenges ahead.

The Secretary-General's analysis offers a sharp contrast to its namesake from 1992, the UN Agenda for Peace.

On one hand, it accepts that the organisation's peace and security tools are severely constrained absent more political support from member states.

On the other hand, it urges these same countries to let the organisation evolve to respond to many of the new security challenges confronting the multilateral system.

These are daunting tasks for a system that continues to face such significant obstacles. But I am convinced that for all of its flaws, the UN is not dead. It is not perfect, but it is not dead.

CONCLUDING MESSAGES AND CALL TO ACTION

I want to conclude by sharing a few words from Sir Brian Urquhart, whose memory we honour today. He ended his 1987 memoir with the following reflection,

"We have created unprecedented possibilities for both progress and disaster on our planet without yet assuming the collective responsibility that both those possibilities demand...."

“In the United Nations, the only global design we have for this daunting task, the enormity of the challenge, the feebleness of the general will, and the smallness of the means were all too evident.

“As the years went by, the obstacles often seemed overwhelming and the spirit alarmingly weak. But then a disaster, or a near disaster, or sometimes even an exceptional leader, would remind the nations once again that they must cooperate or perish.

“The effort continues. It must be intensified.”

One could look at the state of world affairs and lose confidence in the project that is the UN. I challenge you not to.

The UN needs to rise above geopolitical divides. The diplomatic dialogue it can convene is still needed to help resolve many of the world’s most damaging crises. And, perhaps above all, it is meant to be the voice of the voiceless.

Brian Urquhart understood this. I know that many of you here tonight understand this. We at Crisis Group understand this.

But we must all work together to help support the UN in its journey to meet these aspirations.

Thank you very much to UNA-UK for this honour. And to the Embassy of Switzerland for being a champion of the association and the ideals of the United Nations.

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