

Olara Otunnu Opening Remarks
United Nations General Assembly Interactive Dialogue

19 August 2026

Your Excellency, Madame President of the General Assembly,

Your Excellencies the Ambassadors,

Esteemed Delegates,

Members of Civil Society.

Madame President, I thank you for organizing this interactive dialogue and the opportunity to engage with distinguished delegates.

I wish to convey my appreciation to the Secretary-General and the Staff of the United Nations for their dedication and service. Our tribute to them is all the more poignant today, on the anniversary of the deaths of 22 United Nations staff in the 2003 bombing of the UN Offices in Iraq. Among those killed were my dear friends Sergio Vieira de Mello of Brazil and Nadia Younis of Egypt. And with us in the chamber today is one of the survivors, Salim Lone of Kenya.

I also wish to salute my fellow candidates for their commitment and offer to serve the United Nations.

Refocusing on the fundamentals of the United Nations Charter

In the United Nations Charter, the community of nations makes a sacred commitment to ‘*save succeeding generations from the scourge of war,*’ to ‘*reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person,*’ to ‘*establish the conditions for justice and rule of law*’, and to ‘*promote economic and social advancement and better standards of life, of all peoples, in larger freedom*’.

It is upon the bedrock of this collective pledge that the three interconnected pillars of the UN’s work is built: Peace and Security, Human Rights, and Sustainable Development. We must continue to work in tandem on all these pillars.

The United Nations is the only body that represents all of humanity. It was founded, in the aftermath of a savage global war and against the backdrop of the Holocaust, to promote international cooperation, and foster the settlement of international disputes by peaceful means. At no time has this mission been more salient.

A moment of upheaval and opportunity

This is a moment of great upheaval: a moment fraught with grave threats to international peace and security. Economic disenfranchisement and dislocation. Wavering consensus on fundamental principles of human rights. Existential climate and environmental considerations and questions of our stewardship of the earth. A time when autonomous robots and artificial intelligence might evolve to dominate the human race.

Yet, with rapid advances in the field of artificial intelligence and other great scientific and technological leaps and transformations, we also stand on the precipice of a potential golden age in human history. A time to prevent and cure hitherto incurable diseases. A time to lift billions of people out of poverty through financial and digital inclusion. A time to explore the heavens with renewed hope and confidence and insights.

It is against this backdrop of hope and great promise and the gathering threats that the United Nations is once again called upon to fulfill its historic charge. It is an opportunity to reinvent and renew the Organization to give it a new lease on life.

Maintenance of International Peace and Security

Even as we simultaneously address the three pillars of the UN's work, immediate priority must be given to the proliferation of increasingly deadly conflicts that threaten to engulf entire regions and the world.

As Secretary-General, I will support Member States through use of my *Good Offices*, confidential and public diplomatic actions and the convening power of the United Nations, to:

- End the conflict in ***Ukraine***;
- Address the ***Gaza Crisis*** to promote permanent peace across the region;
- Support the Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to bring about permanent peace,

security and economic partnerships across the *Great Lakes Region of Africa*;

- Work closely with the African Union and other global partners to bring about a permanent ceasefire and end to the conflict in *Sudan*;
- Support ongoing diplomatic efforts to bring about a comprehensive peace agreement in the *Iran* conflict; and,
- Support a more coordinated and concerted counter-terrorism response in the *Horn of Africa and Sahel regions*, which have evolved to become the epicenter of global violent extremism.

Children and women suffer disproportionately in situations of war, and their protection must remain an explicit focus of international peace and security. Therefore, I will continue to emphasize the agenda of *Children Affected by Armed Conflict*, as well as the other thematic protection agendas that were developed on the precedent, structure and experience of this mandate – namely, the *Protection of Civilian; Women, Peace and Security*; and, *Conflict-Related Sexual Violence*. For over 25 years these issues have stood as legitimate concerns of international peace and security that belong on the agenda of the Security Council. However, for them to stand the test of time and continue to deliver protection for the most vulnerable, they must remain focused and relevant to the work of the Security Council. The consensus around these mandates needs to be rebuilt.

UN Peace Operations have been an important component of the global architecture for peace and security. It will be essential to ensure that these operations are also more focused in their mandates. That they are more results-oriented and clearly time-bound. That fundamental concerns of burden sharing in financing and troop contributions are addressed, That the sovereignty of affected Member States is respected. And, that there is better consultation with national stakeholders, including civil society and local communities who are on the frontlines of conflict, early-warning and prevention.

Rebuilding consensus on Human Rights

Over the years there have been numerous initiatives and concerted efforts to ensure that Human Rights is addressed not only as a distinct pillar of the UN's work, but that the United Nations system prioritizes human rights across all its work. This will continue to be my emphasis as Secretary-General, including mobilization of greater resources for this pillar.

In order to enact the vision, spirit and promise of the UN Charter for '*fundamental human rights and the dignity and worth of the human person*', it is essential to refocus on our shared human values and aspirations. For a human rights-centered approach to be credible and enjoy the broad 'buy-in' that is required, every effort must be made to guard against politicization or instrumentalization, perceived or otherwise, of a human rights discourse. There should be greater sensitivity to different cultural perspectives and social norms, and the UN should engage Member States and communities in a culturally sensitive way. The UN must better understand and acknowledge the deep traditions and cultures of human dignity, respect and social cohesion that exist. As Secretary-General, I will encourage more tailor-made and context specific strategies for human rights advocacy. This will be my approach to re-building consensus.

Reforming the United Nations

For the United Nations to discharge its Charter responsibility, it must reform. Reform is no longer an optional choice, , it is an imperative. Without it the institution is at grave risk.

Key to the Organization's success is its legitimacy, effectiveness and efficiency. Therefore, reform initiatives begun with UN80, must not only be a *continued* priority of the Secretary-General, but a *continuous* process that becomes part of the DNA, outlook and culture of the Organization.

Reforms – which may entail restructuring, reorganizing and revamping the Organization – should not be treated as a time-bound exercise to complete the work started under the UN80 initiative. The objective of *reform* must ultimately be to *transform* the United Nations to meet the challenges and opportunities of our times.

UN80 has already achieved important cost-savings through measures mandated by the Secretary-General, including:

- Reduction of posts in all Secretariat entities as well as in UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes;
- Relocation of UN staff to more cost-effective duty stations, which, crucially, also brings this capacity geographically closer to the Member States and communities they serve;
- Consolidation of administrative and human resources modalities and platforms, and global payroll integration in New York.

While these initial actions must be further expanded, re-enforced and institutionalized, the next phase is even more important in transforming the Organization, and must be driven by Member States.

This phase entails the systematic review and consideration of mandates by Member States, with the objectives of ensuring mandate focus and clarity; reducing duplication and redundancy; strengthening effectiveness, coherence, and accountability; and, aligning priorities with commensurate resources to enable the United Nations to deliver better results.

As Secretary-General, I will ensure that the Secretariat effectively supports this Member State process by, *inter alia*:

- Completing the comprehensive stocktaking of existing mandates, and providing analysis of overlaps and redundancies, and identifying outdated or obsolete mandates;
- Establishing a rigorous consultative process for the mandate review and consultation of Member States;
- Providing options for Member States' consideration, based on thorough cost-benefit analyses and risk assessments;
- Helping to generate Member State consensus and reconcile differences; and,
- Ensuring appropriate consultation with UN Staff, who will ultimately be responsible for implementing Member State decisions, sustaining reforms, and transforming the United Nations.

While UN80 was initiated in the context of a liquidity crisis and driven by unprecedented financial pressure and cost-saving demands, it is essential that the next phase of UN reform is driven foremost by considerations of efficiency and effectiveness in mandate delivery. This is based on an understanding that a focused and efficient UN will also be a more cost-effective one.

It is also important that our shared understanding of and ambition for UN reform is multifaceted and comprehensive. Therefore, critical on-going initiatives such as **Geographic Diversity**, **Gender Parity**, and **Multilingualism**, must be integral elements of an overall reform agenda. To better represent the global community it serves, the Organization must look like that community.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that such deep ‘root-to-branch’ reform will invariably come with short-term pain, pressure and uncertainty, particularly for the UN Staff who will be expected to enact reform, and on whom the transformation of the UN will depend. Therefore, I will rely on my experience as a former UN manager and leader to drive reform in a determined but judicious and empathetic manner. This includes addressing the imbalance of a ‘top-heavy’ structure that also requires the streamlining of senior posts at USG and ASG levels.

Alleviating the ‘fiscal crunch’ and innovating UN financing

While Member States will continue to be the primary financial underwriters of the United Nations, and the reform of the UN is intended to re-invigorate confidence and commitment, due consideration should also be given to innovative solutions and new alliances to complement Member State contributions and ease the current financial crunch.

Partnerships with the corporate sector and philanthropic support need to be reconceived. This includes building on and evolving the *UN Global Compact* for corporate social responsibility. As Secretary-General, I will use the UN’s advocacy platform and my *Good Offices* to engage in a more structured manner with the Chief Executives and Boards of corporations, foundations and philanthropies. I will seek concrete commitments to support UN mandates and the financing of Sustainable Development Goals. Convening spaces such as the Davos World Economic Forum could be used to reinvigorate the Global Compact and garner new commitments.

Harnessing Artificial Intelligence

As Secretary General, I will work to ensure the creation of a body dedicated to overseeing the UN’s efforts to harness the unprecedented opportunities of Artificial Intelligence, leading to a Global Compact on AI. Such a compact will be centered around our values and aspirations for AI, addressing access, equity and human agency. At the same time, the compact should mitigate the acute risks of unregulated AI. Such an initiative may build on the *Global Digital Compact* established as part of the *Pact for the Future*, the establishment by the General Assembly of the *Independent International Scientific Panel on AI*, and the *Global Dialogue on AI Governance*.

In this effort, we must bring in the private sector entities who are driving evolution in this space, as well as scientists, governments and other stakeholders. The central

challenge is to find an appropriate balance between fostering continued and rapid innovation, while agreeing on the fundamental guardrails and frameworks for the development, adoption, safety and governance of Artificial Intelligence.

Deepening cooperation between the UN and Regional Organizations.

The United Nations cannot ‘go it alone’.

It will be essential to deepen cooperation between the UN and Regional Organizations across the three pillars of peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development. Such cooperation must evolve from aspirational cooperation agreements that have largely lacked clear monitoring, results and accountability frameworks. Our cooperation must become more strategic, practical, targeted in scope, and results and outcomes oriented.

I view this as part and parcel of reform efforts, shifting UN expertise and capacity to the regional level, closer to the communities we serve. In the process, the UN must become a more intentional and effective partner for Regional Organizations and the Member States they represent. Landmark decisions of the Security Council, such as resolution 2719 (2023) supporting African Union-led peace support operations, are practical steps on this path.

Connecting ‘the Global’ to ‘the Community’

When I began receiving calls encouraging me to consider candidacy for Secretary-General, I was deep in Northern Uganda, in a local community in Gulu.

What was I doing there?

For the past five years I have witnessed first-hand the impact of war on communities, especially its devastating toll on children and women. I have seen the challenges of reconciling, rebuilding and restoring a traumatized community. I have worked alongside local leaders and communities of faith, women’s groups and the youth, witnessing their daily struggle for life and dignity, and listening to their hopes and aspirations.

The United Nations must become more relevant for such communities. That is why ***Connecting ‘the Global’ to ‘the Community’*** is a central strand that runs through my Agenda. If given the opportunity to serve as Secretary-General, I will bring this

intimate perspective and experience to the role. And I will strive to reconnect the global public to the United Nations.

Track record of international service, consensus-building and innovation

In my candidacy, I put forward the breadth and depth of experience to meet this moment, and a track-record of consensus-building and developing innovative solutions in situations of deadlock or crisis.

Over four decades of international service I have held many leadership roles across the three pillars of the UN's work. I have served as a member of numerous high-level commissions, focused on International Peace and Security; Conflict Prevention and Conflict Management; Peacemaking and Peacekeeping; Post-Conflict Recovery; Human Rights; Development Issues; Environment; and the Role and Reform of the United Nations.

Notable among these experiences:

- As Uganda's Representative to the UN Security Council, and in my role as its rotating President, I worked to build consensus and proposed innovations in the Council's procedures, including the formula of straw-balloting that resolved the protracted deadlock and crisis over the election of the UN Secretary General in 1981, now known as the "Otunnu Formula".
- As Vice-President of the UN General Assembly (1983-1984), and the Chairman of the GA Credentials Committee, in 1983 I built consensus around another novel formula that succeeded in resolving a major diplomatic showdown between then Soviet Union (and its allies) and the USA (and its allies).
- As the UN's first Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict, I worked with the Security Council in the conceptual framing of resolution 1261 (1998). This anchored the concerns of children affected by armed conflict on the agenda of the Council as a legitimate concern for maintenance of international peace and security. It paved the way for the establishment of a structured compliance regime, and the creation of a new subsidiary organ of the Council, a Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict established by resolution 1612 (2005). The precedent and structure of the CAAC mandate opened the door for the inclusion of other thematic issues on the Council's agenda, namely the Protection of Civilians, Women, Peace and Security and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence.

- I bring a deep commitment to human rights and thorough understanding of the UN Human Rights machinery, having served as Chairman of the UN Commission on Human Rights, and as Uganda's Representative to the Commission. I participated actively in the negotiations in both the UN General Assembly and at the Commission on Human Rights, for the establishment of the position of a UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- As Uganda's Minister of Foreign Affairs, I played a key role in the Uganda Peace Talks (1985-1986), which culminated in the Nairobi Peace Agreement of December 1985.
- I have engaged extensively with academia and 'think tanks' that work adjacent to the United Nations, and value the role that these institutions play in providing data, analysis and recommendations to inform the work of the UN. This includes as President of the International Peace Academy (now International Peace Institute) from 1990-1998. Such institutions are a valuable resource that the United Nations can tap into in pursuing a reform agenda.



***Moral authority of the Secretary-General,
and Leadership in an Age of Hope and Faith***

The UN Secretary General does not wield conventional power, derived from military strength, resource base and support of the population. However, the Secretary General has 'soft power' – the moral authority that flows from the principles of the UN Charter and the support of the Member States. This is a crucial asset. When it is carefully and strategically deployed, it benefits the international community as a whole. Judiciously deploying this moral authority will be central to achieving my Agenda for the United Nations.

Today, the United Nations requires a particular kind of Secretary-General, one who is proactive, a bridge-builder and able to propose creative solutions in difficult situations. It is a moment when statesmanship, vision, diplomatic ingenuity and the moral voice of the Secretary-General is more crucial than ever.

We are blessed to live in an era of great technological revolutions and rapid transformations. This should be the golden age – the age of hope and faith. An age that allows the full flourishing of the human race as one global family of hope and faith.

I take my inspiration from St. Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy...