

**STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT OF THE 72ND SESSION OF THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY
HUMANITARIAN NEGOTIATION AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIATION:
BUILDING BRIDGES
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Thank you very much. Good morning, excellencies, distinguished delegates, dear colleagues,

I want to thank, His Excellency, Didier Reynders, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belgium, for inviting me to address this crucial seminar.

Today, we will focus on two different kinds of people. First, humanitarian negotiators. These are the people securing safe passage for aid convoys. They are facilitating medical evacuations, from besieged towns. And they are working to bring life-saving assistance across conflict lines, and across borders, to the people that need it the most. Secondly, we are here to talk about political mediators. These are the people bringing conflict parties to the table, for peace talks. They are calling for ceasefires. And they are negotiating long-term political settlements.

So, we are here to talk about two different kinds of negotiators, who do two different kinds of jobs. However, they have one thing in common: an aim to alleviate human suffering. That is why this seminar is so important. It allows us to explore how humanitarian negotiators and political mediators can better strengthen and complement each other's work. It also allows us to follow up on some of the ideas and challenges which came from the high-level panel, last December, in Geneva.

As you mentioned, Didier, I outlined my ten principles of mediation during last year's seminar. And I will not repeat them today. Instead, I will try to apply them, more generally, to the theme of today's discussion. And, in doing so, I will make three main points.

First, I want to emphasise the benefit of dialogue.

Because, nothing bad comes from talking. Dialogue is at the centre of the UN's humanitarian and political activities. It is the only way to guarantee the safety of aid workers moving into conflict zones. It is the only way to dismantled roadblocks, and get assistance to where it is needed. It is the only way to move differences from battle fields to negotiation tables. And it is the only way to reach a compromise and an agreement, which can bring about lasting peace. So, humanitarian actors are doing a lot of talking. And, political mediators, too, are doing a lot of talking. But, not always to each other. And that is what we need to address. Because, more dialogue can lead to benefits for all.

Humanitarian actors often operate at the local level. They are on the frontline. They are in direct contact with parties from all sides. They are seeing, and experiencing, the realities of conflict. And so, they can provide crucial, real-time information to political mediators. As noted by participants of the December panel in Geneva, they can act as a much-needed "reality check". Similarly, political mediators can support the objectives of their humanitarian colleagues. They can use their position to advocate for respect for international humanitarian law. They can reinforce the impartiality of humanitarian activities. And they can clarify information, and reduce mistrust among actors on the ground. So, more talking can mean more benefits – for both kinds of negotiators.

But it is not enough to merely call for more dialogue. We cannot rely on once-off initiatives of individual negotiators. Rather, we must plan ahead. We must explore systems, and mechanisms, which can be put into place. We must evaluate the role of technology. We must look to increase the quality – and not just the quantity - of this dialogue, for example through joint training. And we must share best practices – and ask how we can turn them into standard practices.

Today, we have a chance to do just this. I want to, again, thank Belgium for organising this seminar. We need to seize the opportunity it presents to strengthen dialogue between humanitarian and political negotiators. And we need to make sure that the momentum it creates does not end when we all leave this room. Rather, we must ensure that it leads to more opportunities for dialogue on the regional, national and local levels.

But, before I leave this point on dialogue, I want to make one last remark. Because, I want to acknowledge that this kind communication will not always run smoothly. Humanitarian and political negotiators may not always see eye-to-eye. They may have vastly different positions on certain issues. They may engage in heated discussions. And, at times, dialogue may turn to debate, or disagreement.

But that does not mean that it should not happen. Because, as I said, only good things can come from talking. Bad things, however, can come when it breaks down. I am sure many of you have different positions on the theme of this seminar. But your presence here shows that we all have one thing in common: a belief in the power of dialogue.

The second issue I want to address is the search for balance.

This can be the biggest challenge for negotiators and mediators on the ground. They often have to weigh up different - even conflicting - positions. And, among them, they have to find balance and compromise. We need to do the same, today. And, in doing so, we need to face reality. Humanitarian action must be driven by humanity. It must be based solely on the needs of people. And it must be independent of political and military objectives. But, unfortunately, this is not always the reality, on the ground.

Here, I am talking about aid convoys - stopped by conflict parties, just meters away from desperate communities. I am talking about urgent medical evacuations being traded like commodities. I am talking about the denial of permits or permissions, in order to gain political leverage. And I am talking about the bombing of medical facilities, not by accident - but by design. These are clear violations of international humanitarian law. And, they show the devastation that can come when humanitarian ideals are corrupted by political, or military, strategies.

Therefore, we must proceed cautiously - with the aim of finding a balance. We must respect the independent, impartial nature of humanitarian actions. But we must also adapt to the increasing interdependence between humanitarian and political negotiations. We must consider options for closer cooperation and dialogue. But we must also bear in mind the risks of the politicisation of humanitarian work. We must demand accountability for violations of international humanitarian law. But we must also practically respond to the results and impacts of these violations. And so, we must consider the ideals, and balance them against the realities. This is what mediators and negotiators must do on a daily basis. And, to best support them, we must do it ourselves, today.

For my third point, I want to call for a stronger focus on conflict prevention.

Like I said at the beginning, humanitarian negotiations and peace talks aim to alleviate human suffering. They are a response to the horrors of conflict. And they attempt to mitigate these horrors – and bring them to an end. But it is better to prevent – rather than respond – to conflict and suffering. The United Nations set itself an ambitious objective in the first line of its Charter: to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. And, UN mediators, and envoys, around the world, are key to meeting this objective. In the words of the UN Secretary-General, we need a surge in diplomacy. Not only in response to conflict and suffering. But, importantly, before they happen at all.

We need to significantly strengthen UN prevention capacities. We need to hear ideas and suggestions from humanitarian and political negotiators. We need to identify gaps, and delays, which currently exist. And we need to build a prevention toolbox that is capable of living up to the very first commitment made by United Nations Charter.

In April, I will be convening a High-Level Meeting on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace. It will provide a space for creative thinking on the strengthening of the United Nations' conflict prevention capacity. It must include the perspectives of both humanitarian and political negotiators - which is why my team will be following your discussions today closely. And I hope that it will bring some of the ideas we hear today closer to reality.

Excellencies, dear colleagues,

I want, again, to thank Belgium for hosting us. And I want =, again, to thank all of you for participating.

Minister Reynders, I want to reiterate something you said: effective multilateralism *is* the cornerstone of our diplomatic action around the world. And, dialogue is at the heart of our multilateral system. We need more of it on the ground, among our envoys and negotiators. And we need more of it here, in this building. I am sure we will hear many different views and positions today. But the important thing is that we are talking.

Dialogue might not always go smoothly. But, as any mediator will tell you, as long as it is still going, there is still hope.

I thank you.