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## 70 years of the UN – from blue illumina- tions to greater multilateralism

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# The Current Column

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## 70 years of the UN – from blue illuminations to greater multilateralism

Bonn, 26 October 2015. It was on this weekend 70 years ago that the United Nations (UN) Charter took effect. From the Pyramids of Giza and Berlin's Reichstag building to Brazil's Cristo Redentor statue and South Africa's Table Mountain, the world was lit up in vivid UN blue in a strong show of support for the international organisation on this special occasion.

But is there really any cause for celebration? Things look pretty bleak around the world. The war in Syria is about to enter its sixth year, much of the Middle East and North Africa is being rocked by crisis and conflict, and the Ukraine crisis is casting a shadow over Europe. Fragile states are trapped in a downward spiral of violence and poverty, and a total of 59.5 million people worldwide are fleeing their homes. The rate at which plant and animal species are becoming extinct is accelerating rapidly and people are still starving and being robbed of opportunities for their own development.

Does this mean that the UN, the embodiment of the promise to draw the lessons from two World Wars, to safeguard world peace and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, has failed?

Many times over. For a whole host of reasons, the UN has often not played the role that it should have in past crises, and the same is true at present. The organisation either is bypassed, not given sufficient resources and authority by its member states, or wastes its energy on its own bureaucratic interests. This brings shame not only on the UN, but also on the world as a whole, since, ultimately, the UN is not a world government but a forum for the governments of the world.

So what does the UN have to show for itself 70 years on? Former UN Secretary General Hammarskjöld once said that the UN was not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell. Using this non-trivial statement as a yardstick, the UN can chalk up a great many achievements. So far, the world has been spared a nuclear war. UN mediation, dispute resolution and peacekeeping interventions have served to prevent or resolve a wide range of conflicts in recent decades. Smallpox has been wiped out and landmines cleared. Our understanding of development has changed from one that is exclusively economic to one that concerns the freedom of individuals to determine their own lives within planetary boundaries. Many colonies in Asia and Africa have gained independence and joined the community of states. The concept of the interna-

tional rule of law, that is, of international cooperation based on general rules, has become firmly established. While human rights may still be under pressure in many places, they have embarked on a triumphant advance globally. The UN is often the first to respond to humanitarian disasters and stays when others have already left for security reasons. UN organisations go where others cannot or do not wish to go.

At the same time, another fact is of at least equal importance: The UN, with its prohibition of violence, its concept of rule-based cooperation and its strong commitment to human rights, represents an achievement of civilisation that needs to be preserved and built on. The balance of power in the international system is shifting as the world order dominated until now by industrialised Western nations and privileging those countries is coming under pressure and needs to open up to developing countries and emerging economies. Equally, global interdependencies are deepening, requiring all states to work together to tackle challenges such as climate change and global sustainable development. The world is now interconnected to an unprecedented extent, as recognised by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

70 years on from the UN's inception, the world now more than ever needs a strong UN that is committed to the global common good; this is something with which many decision-makers that have had the landmarks of their countries lit up in blue this weekend agree. Nonetheless, they also argue that the UN in its present state is not capable of responding to the immense global challenges and to the need for global governance. Their first priority is to call for comprehensive reform.

Although this diagnosis is not incorrect, the first step needs to be a different one. It is time for member states to once again take multilateralism and, with it, the United Nations seriously. They must put in the hard work of multilateral negotiations and be prepared to have their national interests, which are all too often short term in outlook, scrutinised in the interest of the global common good. This is the only way to lay the foundation for reforms that will turn the UN into an organisation which takes better account of the needs of individual states and those of an interconnected and interdependent world. Concluding an ambitious and equitable climate agreement in December could be the first litmus test in this regard.