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J'accuse!

THE UN

Louise O. Fresco

YOUR EXCELLENCIES, HEADS OF STATE AND HEADS OF GOVERNMENT OF THE 193 MEMBER STATES OF THE UNITED NATIONS,

Allow me, as an ordinary citizen of a small but not entirely marginal member state, to express my concern about your organisation. Less than a year ago you celebrated your seventieth anniversary in a mood of collective satisfaction. Shortly after the Second World War, your predecessors – the 51 countries that signed the foundation charter – were probably sincerely convinced about the UN's goals: to maintain international peace and security and to promote international cooperation in order to solve major socioeconomic and humanitarian problems. And yet almost immediately there followed the chill of the Cold War. And when decades later the fear of nuclear winter appeared to have subsided, it was replaced by concern for melting icecaps, exhausted fossil fuels and expanding deserts. The battle for land has been transformed into a battle for water and seabeds.

Although we haven't experienced a world war since 1945, the current 65 million refugees from many trouble spots – Syria, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa and elsewhere – are testimony to your colossal failings. As are the more than one billion people who are undernourished, who don't go to school, and who live without electricity or sanitation. You regret this situation, of course, but your pronouncements on the subject are so heartbreakingly hollow. No organisation has such an urgent and relevant mission and yet no organisation appears so powerless. You have covered yourselves from the outset by saying that you won't interfere in domestic affairs. But what is domestic in today's world? Refugees, loss of biodiversity, water flows, climate change and pollution – none of these are respecters of borders. The UN dream has degenerated into a platform for political opportunism and short-term coalitions. You have allowed the concept of sovereign

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equality – the equality of member states – to become undermined. Alongside the American and Russian spheres of influence we have seen

the G77, then the G7, which became the G8, and after that the G20, not to mention regional partnerships such as ASEAN, the African Union and the EU. One's neighbours are the ones to talk to about local skirmishes, but the long term calls for unanimity and decisiveness. Your indifference is often a form of cynicism. You are happy about stalemates; you can manage things without the UN. And if there's something that really does have to be agreed on, such as climate, you have dragged your feet in all kinds of ways in the past. And if that no longer works, not least because your own citizens are calling for intervention and the business community is urging action, then you hide behind hollow phrases.

I agree with you. It was already difficult with fifty countries – getting 193 countries to act in unison is impossible. It's therefore imperative that the UN be reformed, also because of its democratic shortcomings. Most of you may have been elected, but your organisation is very far removed from the population of our planet. At the same time, citizens throughout the world are connected and engaged with one another because they have similar concerns about the future. Successive meetings in New York offer little comfort; instead, they fuel the distrust towards negotiators and people in power. Global issues demand new forms of consultation, negotiation and decision-making. Now is a bad time, I hear you say. Forgive me for contradicting you – now is exactly the right time. The world needs a new UN: you are becoming increasingly divided among yourselves precisely at a time when the future demands greater unanimity from you.

At this historical juncture, you have an opportunity to make major changes. You are about to elect a new Secretary General. And fully in keeping with your tradition, it is obvious that the chosen leader won't be too strong and will come from a fairly insignificant country. Your system of geographical 'divide and rule' means that the choice is

probably confined to a candidate from Eastern Europe, preferably a woman. The quality of the proposed candidates is mixed, to put it mildly. I urge you: don't opt for a safe and easy compromise but for competence and courage. And whoever is ultimately chosen, give him or her the room to lead like a true Secretary-General (I can already hear you argue that the SG can't take the place of legitimate governments, but you know full well what I mean). In addition, take the opportunity to finally force a breakthrough in the composition of the Security Council, to expose the scandals among peacekeeping forces and to properly fund the UN refugee organisation. And to transform the unfettered growth of rudderless, poorly functioning agencies and technical bodies with their 'constitutions' into a small, manageable network of centres of technical expertise that collaborate with the world's best knowledge institutions. You are still living in the 1950s, when costly experts had to be sent out across the world on behalf of the UN. Most countries can do a lot themselves, provided their people are given a good education and the means required to work, and they don't fall victim to corruption. Don't tell me that I'm being too idealistic. Of course I am, because without ideals you can't change the world. I speak

for the many people who are hoping for a peaceful and prosperous future. I am counting on your resilience and ability to improvise, I urge you not to hide behind protocol and constitutional impediments.

This letter is already too long (I know you like to leave anything longer than a few paragraphs to your assistants). I await your response, knowing that a joint response from all of you, who routinely can't even agree on the order of business for your meetings, is rare. But please give us a sign that you are prepared to open negotiations about drastic reform of the UN, so that we will then have a body that can propose decisions about problems transcending national boundaries in such a way that national ratification is no longer an obstacle. When your predecessors met in 1945, they didn't understand that the threat facing our world lies not only in wars, but in the very nature of our existence: the way we live and consume is a threat to peace and security. You have an opportunity, no, a duty, to create a UN for our times.

With the assurance of my highest consideration,
LOUISE O. FRESCO

(This piece was written in 2016 prior to the election of the Secretary General)