

Secretary-General's remarks to American Jewish Committee Centennial Dinner

Washington, D.C., 4 May 2006

Mr. President, Chancellor Merkel, Mr. Goodkind, [President, AJC], Mr. Harris, [Executive Director, AJC], Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor for me to join you tonight.

By the time my organization was founded, yours had already spent nearly four decades as an advocate for Jewish civil rights, and for human dignity in the broadest sense. The American Jewish Committee was thus one of a small band of non-governmental organizations that were present at the UN's creation. Your renowned representative, Jacob Blaustein, was one of the most influential figures in that conference. And the institute that bears his name continues to play a vital part in the UN's human rights work through the engagement of its director, Felice Gaer.

In recent years especially, the United Nations and the Jewish community have moved closer together.

The United Nations is fully engaged in the struggle against anti-Semitism and other forms of discrimination.

Last year, in a long overdue observance, the General Assembly held a special session to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camps.

And this year, on 27 January, we marked the first of what will now be an annual international day of remembrance for the victims of the Holocaust.

The United Nations is, I hope and believe, what it always should be – a place where Jews can feel at home.

It is also an Organization within which, more and more, the State of Israel enjoys the same rights and responsibilities as every other member. My good friend Danny Gillerman is now serving as one of the General Assembly's vice-presidents. And for some years Israel has been participating in one of the Assembly's regional groups – the West European and Others Group – in New York. I hope the same group will soon find ways to include Israel in its deliberations in Geneva and Vienna, too.

We should all be pleased about these developments, because our world faces immense challenges. We need the Jewish people – and especially the American Jewish Committee – to make its full contribution, on every item on the global agenda.

Next Tuesday, the General Assembly will elect the first members of the UN's new Human Rights Council. As you know, this Council will replace the old Commission on Human Rights, which in recent times discredited itself by focusing selectively on violations in a few states, while ignoring those in others.

By contrast, the new Council is meant to eliminate double standards, in part by regularly reviewing the human rights record of all countries, starting with its own members. Moreover, those members must uphold the highest principles of human rights, and be elected directly and individually by an absolute majority of the General Assembly. And any members that commit gross and systematic human rights violations can have their membership suspended.

As you know, the United States decided not to present its own candidature this first time. But it has pledged to support and cooperate with the Council with a view to running for a seat in the near future. I trust that the Administration, and also civil society groups like yours, will use their influence to help ensure that other states with a strong and genuine commitment to human rights are elected, and that they give the Council a fresh start, without the baggage that accompanied the Commission.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

What we are really celebrating today is the fact that no one asks you to choose between your Jewish identity and your American identity. On the contrary, everyone understands that America is enriched by the distinctive contribution that you can make as Jews. That was not always true in the past. That it is true today is due in part to the tireless work of the AJC, and it is a wonderful example to all other countries where communities of different faith or tradition live side by side. I hope all countries can learn from, and be inspired by, your experience.

Indeed, I hope that within my lifetime, just as in this country, where Jews are accepted without question as full citizens, by all their fellow citizens, so Israel will be accepted without question as a member by the whole family of nations.

We all know what that means: a peaceful Middle East, at the heart of which will be two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side, within secure borders, in peace and with mutual respect.

I welcome the passion with which Prime Minister Olmert spoke, on the night of Israel's recent general election, about the need to create the conditions in which both peoples will be able to fulfill their dreams of prosperity and peace.

We are all painfully aware that he and President Abbas must overcome enormous obstacles in order to achieve true security for Israelis and statehood for Palestinians. Some of those obstacles seem to have become even more insurmountable in recent weeks and months.

But I refuse to despair. There is still abundant evidence that peace is what the majority of both Israelis and Palestinians want, even if each is reluctant to believe that the other wants it, too. And it is still the case that, while interim measures might bring interim relief, a true and lasting peace can be achieved only through a genuine agreement.

I know that it is easy to speak of this dream, and much harder to turn it into reality. But I pledge that the United Nations, with its partners in the Quartet, will be there to help, working with any who truly seek peace until that goal is achieved.

Dear friends,

As we mark this milestone in your history, I hope we will also recognize the deep, productive ties between our organizations. Our common objectives of preventing genocide and protecting human rights bind us together in a global mission. Suffering wherever it exists, justice wherever it is needed – these are the main claims on our energies. With this thread that connects our organizations, I hope we can weave a strong and lasting fabric of peace.

Congratulations again on a century of action and achievement.

Thank you very much.