



Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for
CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

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Remarks by:

*Ms. Virginia Gamba, Under-Secretary-General
Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General
for Children and Armed Conflict*

*Bestowing of the Sapienza Human Rights Award 2020 to the United
Nations Secretariat for its work to improve human security through ending and
preventing violations against children in situations of armed conflict*

Rome, 14 December 2020

Dear Professor Cadin,

Colleagues and students

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor for me to accept this award in the name of the United Nations Secretariat and the Office where I now serve as Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict.

The *Sapienza Human Rights Award* is well known and respected, as is the Sapienza University of Rome, one of the oldest and most respected universities in the world. Sapienza means wisdom and wisdom is the soundness of an action regarding the application of experience, knowledge and good judgement.

Wisdom has always been here, at this site, not far away from the Sapienza University. It started with the cult of Italian Minerva at her temples in the Aventine and Caelius Hills of Rome. Of course, the goddess Minerva is associated to her Greek counterpart, Athene, goddess of wisdom; and yet Minerva is indigenous to Italy; her first iteration being the Etruscan goddess Menrva, a word that comes from “meminisse”, which means “to remember”. But you already know this because you have written it down in the motto of your brave university: “*Il futuro è passato qui*”, ‘the future was here’.

As we celebrate with the United Nations today the bestowing of this wonderful award, I propose to use your very own motto to reflect on three key themes: the evolving role of the United Nations; the ownership of the concept of human security; and the challenges and dynamics in the protection of children used and abused by, in and for armed conflict. I will then conclude with a reflection about our common responsibilities in the pursuit of effective action to end and prevent violations against children in situations of armed conflict.

Firstly, this year marks the 75th anniversary of the creation of the United Nations. It is particularly poignant to think that the decision to create an organization to bring all nations of the world together, united under a common cause, was taken standing over the shaky rubble of a devastating global war. It is equally illuminating to consider that in its 75th anniversary, the United Nations is also standing upon the rubble of an “old normal” as it faces the post COVID-19 global challenges and needs.

The world had nothing to be proud of in 1945: ambition, fear, ignorance and arrogance had already unleashed destruction on at least three occasions of the previous 75 years. Each one of these international conflagrations left many nation states limping with fatigue and licking their wounds. Moreover, industrialization and colonialism had sown the seed of globalization and the domino effects of central wars were felt the world over, in one or another form. Like a stone cast in the water of humanity, the ripples of war lapped over many foreign shores, changing them forever. And each time, when the waters receded, humanity asked itself whether and if it should or could prevent another catastrophe. Peace agreements came and went, so did alliances. Even the League of Nations, proudly standing in its garden of peacocks in Geneva, fell mute and impotent at the force of the waves of the First World War. And yet, at the end of the second great war, here humanity stood again on the rubble of the past, starting a new organization that sought to work with your motto in mind: *“Il futuro è passato qui”*.

The United Nations was created with the firm conviction that all human beings have equal rights as enshrined in its Charter of the Rights of Man, and that all nations should strive to find peaceful resolution to conflict by providing a safe space where dialogue and consensus might thrive over violence, and where rules of engagement would contain the worst expressions of human cruelty, if it failed.

With the passage of time since its creation, the United Nations’s roles and functions had no choice but to mirror the context and imperatives of each generation. Ultimately, the organization must mirror the challenges and realities of its member states and, as such, it had to adapt to be of service in contexts as diverse as the cold war, the integration of nations into states and the eventual disintegration of states into nations, new threats to global peace and security, and future threats to global survival.

Secondly, the concept of peace and security has also suffered radical changes in the last 75 years. A state-centered world that relied on its deterrence of war through arms and technology gradually cracked around the edges as international wars gave way to intra state conflict and failed states. These were no conflicts that could be deterred through powerful new militarized technologies, and they returned to the basic capabilities of killing people and breaking things. Nonmilitary threats to security appeared, ranging from the rise in international organized crime, terrorism, and the economic dimensions of conflict to genocide and the return of slavery,

among others. State-centered defense, useful as a guiding principle for retaining peace and security eventually was replaced by the human-centered concept of safety and security as formulated by the United Nations Development Program's concept of "human security".

The big questions of nation-states were posed and discussed at the United Nations: is humanitarian intervention possible? Should the organization represent member states or nations? Are there common human security problems such as environmental degradation and climate change? Are institutions democratic? Should they be? Is collective action possible to bring about human security? What are the roles of State and Non-State actors and more importantly, can we all agree on common principles for action and rules of engagement for conduct for the better protection of individuals? What should prime? The security of a state or the safety of its individuals? Can peace exist without development? Can peace come without justice?

We still sit here with evolving concepts of peace, security and development and although the United Nations attempts to reach consensus for action on these massive questions, even the Sustainable Development Goals are beginning to slip through our fingers while climate change imperatives loom larger than ever. And yet, once again, the position of the individual at the center of this debate vis-à-vis the position of a state is nothing more and nothing less than the manifestation of your motto: *"Il futuro è passato qui"*.

This brings me to my third theme: the challenges and dynamics in the protection of children used and abused by, in and for armed conflict. Let us agree that in the last 75 years, the world has changed beyond recognition through technology, globalization and inter-dependence. But we can safely say today, with the benefit of hindsight, that we were unable to establish a peaceful co-existence among nations or to reaffirm institutions and democratic processes and even less to ensure that all human beings were granted the assurances of common human rights, let alone common obligations and responsibilities. Inequality has been as rife as diversity; and abuse of authority and corruption is easily equated to power.

But the world is not a static construct and other realities are making themselves felt, such as demographics, poverty and environmental degradation. The push and pull factors that ignite or depress violent conflict are simply not understood

and peace is not prospering; neither is human security. Perhaps nowhere else can we see this tragedy unfolding better than in the use and abuse of children in, for and by armed conflict. As violence results in armed conflict, the suffering of women, children and other most vulnerable human beings, are not just a sad by-product of war; they have become the main product. Armed groups, perhaps animated by the economic dimensions of conflict, abduct, rape and forcibly recruit children, using them as disposable assets in the front lines of war. Armed forces, judging children with the same rod as they judge adults in the fight against extreme terrorism, have detained and, worse, killed or maimed children on the assumption of alleged association to armed groups acting in conflicts that they neither wanted nor started.

In already poverty-riddled environments, even the capacity of these children to rise above their circumstances through education has been removed as their schools, and now, their hospitals are attacked and destroyed, as military targets shift to civilian ones and children are used as human shields or hostages in new horrific tactics of war. Often the children in situations of armed conflict represent more than 50% of the entire population, such as in South Sudan or Afghanistan, and they are, therefore seen, as a bother and impediment for the well-being of others at best, such as in the case of migrant unaccompanied children or street-children. At worst, they are considered a disposable commodity for use in war such as the use of girls as human bombs by Boko Haram in Nigeria or the use of boys as anti-personnel landmine detonators by armed groups of Myanmar and Somalia.

The fact remains that children are no longer our future; the demographics show us that they are already our present. We have failed them in the past and we are failing them today. Again, your motto is applicable: *“Il futuro è passato qui”*.

In conclusion, if human beings are to prevail, we need to start acting with wisdom. Memory is wisdom, and wisdom is nothing more than the wise application of memory, in the form of experience and knowledge. The international protection of human rights, including the protection of children in situations of armed conflict, requires and deserves this type of wisdom. Through training professionals in the field of international protection and the promotion of human rights on all aspects of human security, universities such as this oldest of institutions in Rome, can and will pass on the expertise and knowledge accumulated in the past

to new generations who can then adapt this knowledge and place it at the service of our common future.

A friend of mine, Francesco Calogero, who graduated with a *laurea in fisica cum laude* at this Sapienza University and who became not just professor of Theoretical Physics here, but also Secretary General of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, and hence Nobel Prize winner in 1995, first taught me the wisdom of the 1955 Russell-Einstein manifesto against nuclear weapons. That wonderful manifesto ends by stating: “Most of us are not neutral in feeling, but, as human beings, we have to remember that, if the issues between East and West are to be decided in any manner that can give any possible satisfaction to anybody, whether Communist or anti-Communist, whether Asian or European or American, whether White or Black, then these issues must not be decided by war. We should wish this to be understood, both in the East and in the West. There lies before us, if we choose, continual progress in happiness, knowledge, and wisdom. Shall we, instead, choose death, because we cannot forget our quarrels? We appeal as human beings to human beings: Remember your humanity and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, there lies before you the risk of universal death”. I, for one, have never forgotten the wisdom of these words because they also are the key to your motto: “*Il futuro è passato qui*”.

I am honored in receiving this award on behalf of the United Nations Secretariat and I hope that you continue to honor your motto and that you retain the memory of the past suffering of people to stop others from suffering in the future. Please, be wise.

Thank you.