

The United Nations Association of London and the South-Eastern Region Annual General Meeting , 2nd November, 2024

President's Address

by H.E. Dr. Fatou BENSOU DA - President

Ladies and Gentlemen, Honourable Members of the United Nations Association of London and the Southeastern Region, colleagues, distinguished guests, I am deeply honoured to address you all today as the President of our association, and I am with you with a profound sense of responsibility. Together, we represent a diverse body of individuals who have committed ourselves to the ideals of peace, justice, and the defence of human dignity. It is both humbling and inspiring to see so many gathered in support of these ideals, ideals that transcend borders, cultures, and creeds, and that ultimately uphold our shared humanity.

We meet at a moment in history that, though rich with advancements and opportunities, is burdened with unique and overwhelming challenges. As we reflect upon global affairs, we are forced to recognize that the stability we once envisioned for our world remains vulnerable. Across continents, conflicts continue to rage, humanitarian crises emerge in ever more complex patterns, and the fundamental rights of individuals face threats that are increasingly difficult to combat. Our gathering today reaffirms our shared commitment to addressing these threats, it reinforces our duty to advocate for the principles upon which the United Nations was founded, and it compels us to confront our role in a world that so urgently needs our efforts.

This afternoon, I want to speak on an issue that is both fundamental and urgent—the protection of human rights and dignity amidst armed conflict. Despite the frameworks we have established and the countless efforts made to defend these rights, we are continually reminded by ongoing and recent conflicts that our world is far from achieving universal peace. More than ever, we must recognize our collective conscience as a global community and sharpen it. We must be bold, resolute, and clear-eyed as we work to reinforce the safeguards that protect human lives and dignity in the darkest of times.

At the core of this pursuit are two primary frameworks: International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL). These two systems, though distinct in their applications, share a common goal—to preserve the sanctity of human life. IHL, often referred to as the 'law of armed conflict', was designed to ensure that humanity is respected, even in times of war. Its focus is on protecting civilians, prisoners of war, and those who are not actively involved in hostilities. Meanwhile, IHRL enshrines universal human rights, intended to apply to every person at all times, both in peace and conflict.

In theory, these frameworks offer a formidable line of defence against inhumanity. Yet, we must confront the sobering truth that they have not yet delivered the level of protection that people so desperately need. Today, I will delve into the reasons why, examining three primary obstacles we face in this pursuit: the changing nature of conflict; the challenge of enforcement; and the rise of new, destabilizing technologies. Finally, I will share how I believe we, as advocates and members of the United Nations Association, can lead in promoting the necessary reforms that bring the international community closer to its ideals.

The Evolving Nature of Conflict

Our first challenge lies in the fundamental transformation of conflict itself. Gone are the days when wars were largely state-to-state affairs. Traditional wars between nations, fought on clear frontlines and governed by established diplomatic norms, are increasingly rare. Instead, we see a shift toward internal conflicts, civil wars, and asymmetrical confrontations involving a range of actors—from militant groups to powerful non-state factions whose motivations often combine ideological, religious, and economic factors. These actors, by their very nature, operate outside the framework of established treaties such as the Geneva

Conventions. They have not pledged to uphold humanitarian norms and, in many cases, are openly hostile to them.

This shift has led to a tragic erosion of the very principle that lies at the heart of International Humanitarian Law: the protection of non-combatants. In too many modern conflicts, civilians are not just caught in the crossfire—they are actively targeted. We see hospitals, schools, and homes turned into battlegrounds. We see communities terrorized and lives destroyed in ways that flagrantly disregard the protections once enshrined in international law. The core distinction between combatants and non-combatants—a distinction meant to shield the innocent from harm—is fading before our eyes. We must ask ourselves: what use is a law if its principles are discarded by those waging war?

This reality demands a response. As defenders of IHL, we must reaffirm that the rules of war are not negotiable. We must champion the inviolable right of civilians to live in safety, even in conflict zones. And we must work tirelessly to reinforce these principles among all parties to conflicts, state and non-state actors alike. This task is not easy, but it is critical. For without a renewed commitment to protecting non-combatants, we risk losing the very essence of our humanity in times of war.

The Enforcement Challenge

A second, and equally daunting, challenge is that of enforcement. Both International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law depend upon the willingness of states and warring factions to adhere to their tenets. But adherence cannot be assumed, and violations are distressingly common. While institutions such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the United Nations have mechanisms to hold violators accountable, the reality is that enforcement remains inconsistent. The selective application of justice has, in many cases, left the most powerful unaccountable while concentrating efforts on prosecuting the politically weaker. This is not justice; this is bias, and it is dangerous.

When justice appears to be applied only to those with limited influence or power, it sends a message that accountability is not universal. Such selective enforcement corrodes the credibility of international law. It breeds cynicism and resentment, and it emboldens those who believe they are beyond reach. This culture of impunity allows atrocities to go unpunished, reinforcing a tragic cycle of violence and suffering.

To counteract this culture, our association and the international community as a whole must advocate for impartial justice. We must insist that the protections offered by IHL and IHRL are non-negotiable and that they apply equally to all, regardless of status or power. We must call for a global legal system that is not only resilient but also fair, transparent, and uncompromising in its commitment to hold all violators accountable. Let us remember: justice is not a privilege reserved for the few; it is a fundamental right owed to all. And it is our duty to demand this right, for those who cannot demand it for themselves.

Emerging Technologies and New Forms of Warfare

The third major challenge we face lies in the rapid advancement of technology and the emergence of new, destabilizing forms of warfare. Cyber-attacks, drone strikes, and the potential rise of autonomous weapon systems are transforming the nature of conflict in ways that our current legal frameworks are ill-equipped to address. These developments raise complex ethical and legal questions. When a drone strike takes the lives of civilians miles from any active battleground, how do we account for proportionality? When a cyber-attack disrupts entire nations, crippling hospitals, and endangering lives, how do we measure accountability?

And perhaps most concerning of all is the prospect of artificial intelligence entering the field of warfare. Autonomous weapon systems, which may one day make life-or-death decisions without human oversight, represent a profound challenge to our concept of accountability. How can we, as stewards of humanity's best interests, allow machines—

bereft of empathy, moral judgment, or an understanding of human life—to dictate matters of war? This shift not only undermines the foundational principles of humanitarian law but also poses an existential threat to the ideals we have sworn to protect.

The rise of such technologies demands an urgent response. We must work together to develop new guidelines, new legal frameworks, and new ethical boundaries that address these evolving threats. We must insist that human oversight, compassion, and responsibility remain at the heart of every action taken in times of war. Our future may be one of advanced technology, but let us ensure it is also a future that upholds the timeless values of humanity.

Our Role as Advocates and Agents of Change

In the face of these daunting challenges, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Yet, I am with conviction that even today we must continue to be hopeful, for I believe that we—members of the United Nations Association—can make a difference. We have a critical role to play in advancing the principles of IHL and IHRL and in advocating for the reforms necessary to bridge the gap between law and reality. I believe we have three main avenues through which we can effect meaningful change.

1. Promoting Accountability and Justice

Our first task is to advocate for stronger international mechanisms that promote accountability and justice. True justice must be impartial, untainted by political interests, and free from the influence of power. We must call for a robust, fair, and transparent legal system that treats all violators equally and that holds the powerful to the same standards as the powerless. Bodies like the ICC, whose mandate is to address the gravest offenses, must receive unwavering support from all nations, and this includes political, financial, and logistical backing. Justice cannot be served when those tasked with enforcing it are hobbled by limited resources or obstructed by political agendas.

2. Leveraging Innovation for Humanitarian Protection

Second, we must harness the potential of technological innovation to enhance humanitarian protection. Advances in satellite imagery, secure communication tools, and digital documentation offer unprecedented opportunities to monitor, record, and respond to human rights violations. These tools can bear witness to atrocities even in the most remote or restricted areas, providing a level of transparency that was once unimaginable. We should champion initiatives that use technology for humanitarian purposes and that prioritize the protection of civilians in conflict zones. Technology, in this sense, becomes a powerful means of promoting accountability and, ultimately, justice.

3. Shaping the Discourse on Future Conflicts

Our final task is to shape the conversation about future conflicts. As members of the United Nations Association, we are educators, advocates, and agents of transformation. We have a responsibility to foster a deeper understanding of IHL and IHRL within our communities, to inspire our neighbors to recognize the importance of these protections, and to encourage them to support policies that strengthen global accountability. In doing so, we cultivate a society that values peace, that understands the profound importance of international law, and that stands in solidarity with those who suffer in conflict.

A Call to Action

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, our mission is not an easy one, nor is it one that can be accomplished overnight. But it is a mission that matters—a mission that holds the potential to transform lives, to uplift the vulnerable, and to defend the dignity of those whom war seeks to erase. For in every conflict, in every war-torn village, in every shattered community, there are voices—innocent voices—that call out for justice, for protection, and for dignity. They are the ones waiting for the world to remember them, to stand with them, and to declare that their lives are precious, that their rights are inviolable, and that they will not be forgotten.

It is our privilege—and our solemn responsibility—to answer that call. Let us commit ourselves to this cause with unwavering determination. Let us be the advocates, the defenders, and the champions of those who cannot defend themselves. And let us carry forth the torch of human dignity with courage, compassion, and conviction, lighting a path toward a world where peace is not merely an ideal, but a reality.

Thank you for your dedication to this cause. Thank you for your commitment to justice, to peace, and to the enduring spirit of humanity. Together, let us strive to make a difference. Let us be relentless in our mission to uphold the principles that bind us all.
Thank you.