
Presidential Farewell Address

***“Guardians of Humanity: Upholding Justice in an Age
of Division”***

***Address by H.E. Dr. Fatou Bensouda - President of
UNA LASER (2022-2025)***

**United Nations Association – London and South East Region (UNA LASER)
In Partnership with the United Nations Association of the United Kingdom (UNA-UK)**

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

Esteemed members of the United Nations Association London and
South East Region,

Cherished friends, and colleagues,

It is with profound humility and deep gratitude that I stand before you this
afternoon. To be entrusted with your confidence and called to lead such
a constellation of conscience is both a privilege and a sacred
responsibility. Tonight, we gather not merely as representatives of an
association, but as custodians of a vision, the vision that humanity, when
united by purpose, can rise beyond the boundaries of self and
circumstance to shape a world governed by justice, guided by truth, and
graced by peace.

Your gathering here today and in the past years, dear friends, is a
testament to what is possible when conviction triumphs over
indifference, when courage defies complacency, and when ordinary
citizens dare to believe that the arc of history, though long and often
uncertain, bends inexorably toward hope.

We come together in gratitude, and in resolve. Gratitude, for the quiet heroes among us: the volunteers who give without seeking, the branch leaders who build bridges of understanding, the policy thinkers who challenge complacency, and the partners whose steadfast hands hold this vision firm against the tempests of our time.

And resolve, because the challenges that confront our world today are immense, the moral tests unrelenting, and yet, never has the call for principled leadership been so clear, nor the opportunity to make a difference so urgent.

So let this evening not be a mere ceremony of words, but a renewal of will, a declaration that our faith in humanity remains unbroken, our pursuit of justice unyielding, and our belief in peace undiminished. For when citizens unite around values that transcend borders, dignity, truth, compassion, and courage, the impossible begins to yield.

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests, and fellow advocates for global cooperation, as the outgoing President of UNA LASER, I want to reflect on the critical challenges facing multilateralism and the United Nations. In an increasingly interconnected world, the need for collective action and a rules-based international order has never been more pressing.

The United Nations, born out of the ashes of World War II, has been the cornerstone of global governance for over 75 years. However, the institution faces unprecedented challenges, from rising nationalism and

protectionism to the erosion of international norms and the proliferation of conflicts.

Let us pause to reflect on some of the key challenges to multilateralism and the UN? Some of the pressing issues include:

- The increasing trend of unilateralism and isolationism among some member states
- The growing divide between developed and developing countries
- The impact of technological advancements on global governance
- The need for reform within the UN to make it more effective and representative

As we look to the future, it's crucial that we reinvigorate our commitment to multilateralism and the principles of the UN Charter. We must work together to address the pressing global challenges of our time, from climate change and pandemics to poverty and inequality.

UNA LASER, as a proud member of the global UN community, will continue to play its part in promoting awareness, advocacy, and action on these critical issues. I urge all of you to join us in this effort, to ensure that the United Nations remains a beacon of hope for a more peaceful, prosperous, and just world.

Together, we can make a difference.

Today we have rising nationalism and protectionism. Growing nationalist sentiments and protectionist policies in various countries are undermining global cooperation and the rules-based international order.

We also encounter Great Power Rivalries. Increasing tensions between major powers, such as the US and China, are hindering cooperation and creating divisions within multilateral institutions.

There is also the issue of Global Governance Gaps. Existing institutions struggle to address emerging issues like climate change, pandemics, and cybersecurity effectively.

Developing countries often feel underrepresented in decision-making processes, leading to dissatisfaction with current multilateral frameworks.

Challenges for the Future are huge but not insurmountable.

Rapid advancements in technology pose regulatory and governance challenges that require international cooperation.

The urgency of addressing climate change will continue to test multilateral cooperation and commitment.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted weaknesses in global health governance, emphasizing the need for improved cooperation.

The rise of new economic powers and shifting global dynamics will require adaptations in multilateral institutions and frameworks.

A question I have consistently asked myself is the possibility to reforming multilateralism.

Strengthening Global Governance: Reforming institutions like the UN Security Council and the World Trade Organization to make them more representative and effective.

Ensuring diverse voices are heard and represented in decision-making processes.

Collaborating with regional organizations and other stakeholders to address global challenges

These are some of the key challenges and potential solutions. The future of multilateralism will depend on how effectively countries can work together to address these issues.

Conflicts like Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan are critical challenges to multilateralism, and I will just say a few words on them

The Gaza conflict is a prime example of multilateralism's limitations. The UN has struggled to broker a lasting ceasefire, and the international community's response has been fragmented. The US has played a significant role in negotiating a ceasefire, but its efforts have been hindered by Israel's concerns about Hamas's disarmament. The EU has called for a two-state solution, but progress remains elusive. It is widely assessed that the so called ceasefire did not take into account the suffering of the ordinary Palestinian population.

The Ukraine conflict highlights the challenges of great power rivalry. Russia's veto power in the UN Security Council has stalled decision-making, and the international community's response has been divided.

The EU and US have imposed sanctions on Russia, but a lasting solution remains out of reach.

The Sudan conflict demonstrates the complexities of regional dynamics. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have competing interests, and the international community's response has been inadequate. The UN has launched humanitarian appeals, but funding remains insufficient.

These conflicts underscore the need for more effective multilateralism. The UN's 80th anniversary has prompted calls for reform, including limiting the veto power of permanent Security Council members. However, progress remains slow, and the international community must work harder to address these challenges.

Civil society organizations like UNA LASER can play a vital role in promoting multilateralism and addressing global challenges. Some potential solutions come to mind.

We can push for reforms to make the UN Security Council more representative and effective, addressing issues like veto power and regional representation.

Encourage governments to involve diverse voices, including youth, women, and marginalized communities, in decision-making processes.

Back initiatives like the Global Digital Compact, focusing on AI governance, digital cooperation, and bridging the digital divide.

Advocate for debt relief and sustainable development financing, ensuring countries prioritize human well-being over debt servicing.

Encourage collaboration between governments, civil society, private sector, and local authorities to tackle global challenges.

We can also support initiatives like the UN Youth Office, amplifying young people's voices and promoting intergenerational equity, and emphasize human rights, gender equality, and social justice in global governance and development agendas.

UNA LASER can contribute by:

Raising Awareness: Educate members and the public about multilateralism's importance and challenges.

Building Partnerships: Collaborate with other civil society organizations, governments, and international institutions.

Advocating for Policy Changes: Push for policy reforms and initiatives supporting multilateralism and global cooperation.

Empowering Local Action: Support local initiatives and projects promoting global citizenship and sustainable development.

These solutions can help address pressing global challenges and promote a more inclusive, effective, and networked multilateralism.

I highlight three words that have guided my service and, I believe, define the character of this association: trust, valour, and honour.

Trust, because our credibility is our currency. UNA LASER exists to champion a rules-based, human-rights-respecting global order. We speak not as partisans but as principled advocates, not as spectators but as stewards. Our members, world citizens in the finest sense, trust

us to tell the truth, especially when truth is inconvenient, unfashionable, or difficult.

Valour, because civil associations like ours must do hard things. We stand in spaces where indifference is easy and engagement is costly. We insist that international law is not an abstraction but a shield for the vulnerable and a boundary for the powerful. We petition, we publish, we persuade. We refuse to be daunted by complexity or fatigued by repetition. And we do this work knowing that progress is rarely linear and never inevitable.

Honour, because our methods must reflect our ends. We will not resort to the shortcuts of cynicism. We will not trade integrity for influence. We will not weaponize the pain of others for attention. Our mission compels us to act in ways that ennoble, not inflame; to build bridges, not burn them; to amplify the voiceless, not to speak over them.

As President of UNA LASER for the past three years, I have seen these three virtues come alive across our family of branches. The London and South East Region supports some thirty local UNA groups that meet in libraries, community halls, universities, and online rooms that never sleep. They convene conversations about the climate emergency, the laws of war, the rights of refugees, and the responsibilities of citizens. They write to parliamentarians not with slogans but with substance. They welcome the next generation with training, mentorship, and the wonderful assumption that young people are not merely future leaders, they are leaders now.

Allow me to be specific about the work you do, because the measure of a civil association is not in its mission statements but in its measurable service.

You campaign for the human rights of Palestinians. You do so steadfastly and soberly, refusing dehumanization from any direction, insisting that equal human worth is not negotiable and that the protection of civilians is not optional. You understand that accountability is not a weapon; it is a promise, to victims, to survivors, and to the future.

You campaign to prevent starvation in Somalia. You do not allow the tyranny of distance to numb compassion or the complexity of conflict to excuse inaction. You organize learning events, you amplify evidence-based appeals, you direct attention to the life-saving work of UN agencies and their partners, and you press for humanitarian access without impediment or politicization.

You campaign to prevent climate catastrophe. You remind decision-makers that atmospheric chemistry is immune to ideology and immune to denial. You celebrate the guardians of biodiversity and the protectors of our oceans, connecting local action on plastic pollution and coastal protection to global frameworks that safeguard the commons for generations not yet born.

You hold the UN to account as a critical friend. Those last two words, “critical friend,” carry a world of meaning. The UN is a mirror of the world’s politics; it can sometimes reflect our failures more than our aspirations. Yet you remain at the table, pushing for reform, defending the UN’s unique convening authority, and reminding all of us that multilateral problems have no unilateral solutions.

You have also defended the rules-based order at moments when it might have felt easier to retreat. When a permanent member of the Security Council invades a neighbour, it is not only a violation of borders; it is a test of the world's belief that law has standing even when power is tempted otherwise. UNA LASER has told that truth with clarity and care, supporting international accountability mechanisms and standing with victims of aggression without erasing the complexity of peacemaking.

This, then, is what a civil association contributes to public life: it sharpens our conscience, sustains our attention, translates expertise into action, and makes solidarity practical. When governments falter and markets fail, civil society holds the line, quietly, faithfully, relentlessly.

But let us also be candid about our challenges. The first is attention. We compete with the velocity of distraction, with an economy of outrage that rewards the sensational over the substantive. UNA LASER answers this by insisting on depth: briefing notes instead of clickbait, conversations instead of confrontations, coalitions instead of echo chambers.

The second is fatigue. The human heart is not designed to carry every burden at once, yet our newsfeeds ask us to do exactly that. We must offer our members the discipline of focus and the permission to rest, so that our activism remains humane and our hope remains renewable.

The third is trust itself. In an age of misinformation, the authority to speak is earned, not assumed. We must cite our sources, show our work, acknowledge uncertainty, and correct our mistakes. That is not weakness, it is moral strength. The greatest gift we can offer the public square is the humility to learn and the courage to change.

The fourth is resources. Volunteers do miracles on small budgets; but that should not be an excuse to underinvest in the infrastructure of impact. If we want to grow our youth programs, expand our policy capacity, and extend our reach to communities that do not yet see themselves in “international affairs,” then we must match ambition with sustainable support. Fundraising is not a distraction from mission; it is a commitment to mission’s endurance.

Finally, there is partnership. Our task is to braid together the practical wisdom of communities, the analytical rigour of universities, the convening power of local authorities, the legitimacy of faith communities, and the agility of social enterprises. UNA LASER is at its best when it is a bridge, between disciplines, between generations, and across differences that the uncareful world is too quick to widen.

Colleagues, some have asked me over these years whether my professional life in international justice can harmonize with the leadership of an association like ours. I have replied that the harmony is not only possible, it is essential. The institutions of international law are only as strong as the public that believes in them. Without citizens who understand why war crimes are crimes, why crimes against humanity assault the human family, and why impunity corrodes peace, courts become distant, treaties become dusty, and victims become footnotes. UNA LASER helps to keep justice close to citizens, and citizens close to justice.

I think of the countless events you have organized in these past years: panels on the protection of civilians, seminars on ocean governance, debates on the ethics of sanctions, workshops on the Sustainable

Development Goals, vigils for the displaced, and reading groups that elevate evidence above ideology. You do not wait for the perfect moment. You create the moment. You do not appeal to the lowest common denominator. You call us to our highest common purpose.

Permit me to linger for a moment on our work for the oceans. The ocean is both a metaphor and a mandate. A metaphor, because it reminds us that borders are not barriers to currents; what we throw away returns to us in altered forms. A mandate, because ocean health is inseparable from food security, climate stability, and the cultural identity of coastal communities. You have raised your voices for robust global agreements to protect the high seas, for financing that recognizes the full value of blue carbon ecosystems, and for a jurisprudence that treats environmental harm as a breach of justice, not a footnote to commerce.

Permit me, too, to honour our work on the climate emergency. We know the science is stark. But we refuse apocalyptic resignation because we see solutions in motion: cities re-imagining transit, innovators decarbonizing industry, farmers regenerating soils, youth mobilizing votes and ideas. UNA LASER's role is to connect that progress to a global architecture, with targets, transparency, and transitions that are just. A just transition does not sacrifice workers for goals or the Global South for statistics. It shares burdens fairly and benefits widely. That is the multilateralism we must model.

On humanitarian crises, from famine risks in Somalia to displacement across regions, your work is a rebuke to fatalism. You remind donors that early action saves lives and money, that access is a legal obligation not a diplomatic favour, and that dignity is more than the distribution of

calories. You insist on the protection of aid workers and on the equal protection of all civilians. You restore names to numbers and faces to headlines.

Regarding Palestine and Israel, you have walked a narrow road with uncommon steadiness. You have refused the seductions of selective empathy. You have upheld international humanitarian law without exception, recognized the grief of all families, and pressed for pathways where accountability and a credible political horizon travel together. When the cacophony grows intolerant, you have modelled a different pedagogy, one that distinguishes between people and policies, pain and propaganda, justice and vengeance.

To those who argue that the UN is too slow, too imperfect, or too political, you answer with the wisdom of practice: there is no durable peace without dialogue, no effective climate action without common frameworks, no protection for refugees without shared responsibility, and no end to pandemics without transparent cooperation. We must reform what needs reforming and defend what needs defending. We do not confuse the flaws of the system with the futility of the project.

Friends, we are living in a time when many societies are tempted to pull up the drawbridge. The language of insularity is often wrapped in the rhetoric of security. But isolation is not security; it is a slow erosion of capacity. The challenges that feel “far away” have already arrived, in supply chains, in price shocks, in weather patterns, in public health, and in the stories our children will tell about us. Our task is not to choose between the local and the global; it is to recognize that the local is enriched and protected by a global order rooted in rights and rules.

Let us, therefore, recommit to the discipline of evidence. Let us recommit to the craft of dialogue. Let us recommit to the practice of empathy, not the vague empathy that dissolves into sentiment, but the disciplined empathy that asks hard questions and does harder work. We cultivate an empathy that is sturdy enough to face facts and generous enough to face each other.

In this spirit, allow me to honour an individual whose steadfastness has been a North Star for so many of us. **Patricia Rogers**. Patricia, your steadfast work, unrivalled support, and passionate tenacity have fortified UNA LASER through every season. You have organized with patience, advocated with precision, and encouraged with warmth. You have been the steady hand and the generous heart, the careful editor and the fearless mobilizer. From the meticulous planning of our AGM to the tender care of volunteers, from policy drafts to post-event cups of tea, you have embodied the quiet excellence that makes everything else possible. On behalf of the association and on behalf of those who will never know how much they owe you: thank you. Your example is a lesson in what leadership truly is, service without spectacle; persistence without complaint; fidelity without fatigue.

I wish also to acknowledge the branches, the lifeblood of our work. To the student chapters that treat curiosity as a civic duty; to the community branches that open doors wider than the news cycle; to the researchers whose footnotes change minds; to the moderators who hold difficult conversations with grace; to the treasurers who make pennies perform miracles: you are UNA LASER. If your meetings are small, remember that history has often turned on small rooms filled with large ideas. If

your meetings are large, remember that numbers gain meaning when they become neighbours. Keep going. Keep welcoming. Keep learning.

I am often asked: where does courage come from in this work? It comes from the victims who testify. It comes from the mothers who organize. It comes from the investigators who document what some would prefer to remain unseen. It comes from the lawyers who write in the language of law so that future generations will not have to write in the language of grief. It comes from teachers who insist that facts matter. It comes from young people who refuse to inherit the cynicism of the world as it is and instead demand the decency of the world as it should be.

We are sometimes told that our aims are too idealistic. I reply that our aims are precisely as realistic as our willingness to work for them. International justice is not a fantasy; it is a framework with rules, mechanisms, and jurisprudence. Climate action is not a slogan; it is policy design, infrastructure investment, and relentless transparency. Human rights are not rhetorical ornaments; they are the hard law that protects soft lives. Our work is to align imagination with institution, moral purpose with public policy, and the passions of the citizen with the patience of the state.

As we go forward, I propose five priorities for UNA LASER:

First, deepen our policy bench. Let us grow thematic working groups that produce short, rigorous, replicable outputs, briefs that local branches can use; model letters to representatives; explainers that demystify UN processes; toolkits for engaging councils and schools.

Second, widen our circle. Let us be deliberate about inclusion, geographic, socioeconomic, racial, generational. Let us partner with

further education colleges, faith networks, diaspora associations, and professional bodies. Let us translate international issues into local stakes, so more people see themselves in the story.

Third, equip our youth. Let us expand mentorship, public-speaking coaching, research internships, and opportunities to represent UNA LASER in national and international fora. When we invest in youth leadership, we invest in the durability of decency.

Fourth, protect our volunteers from burnout. Let us normalize sabbaticals, rotate roles, share templates, and practise grateful efficiency, meeting only when needed, deciding as close to the work as possible, documenting so others can pick up the thread.

Fifth, cultivate public trust. Let us insist on accuracy, declare conflicts of interest, publish our methodologies, and model civil disagreement. Let our internal culture be as honest as the world we seek to build.

This is demanding work. But we do not shrink from it, because we have seen the dividends of perseverance. We have seen a letter, drafted carefully, alter a vote. We have seen a public event rescue a neglected issue from obscurity. We have seen a youth member, given a microphone and a moment, move a room from apathy to action. We have seen the resilience of communities after floods and fires, the tenderness of neighbours who refuse to let another go hungry, the intellectual bravery of scholars who challenge comfortable myths. We have seen, again and again, that the moral imagination is a renewable resource.

As a civil association, we have a peculiar advantage: we are free to tell the truth even when it costs us. We are free to revise our viewpoints

when the evidence requires it. We are free to experiment with new forms of engagement, to admit that a tactic failed and to try another. We are free to praise institutions for what they do well and to press them where they fall short. In a polarized age, such freedom is priceless.

Some evenings, when the emails feel endless and the crises relentless, I return to a simple image: a circle of chairs, a pot of tea, a few earnest people who decide to care together. That is where change begins. That is where UNA LASER lives. That is how movements endure, not through the blare of a single moment but through the quiet chorus of many moments, sustained by ordinary people doing extraordinary things persistently.

Before I conclude, let me thank the officers and executive who have supported this presidency with wisdom and grace. Thank you for your counsel when decisions were difficult and your humour when days were long. Thank you for believing, not in personalities, but in purpose; not in applause, but in accountability.

And once more, Patricia, thank you. Your name will be spoken with affection and respect wherever UNA LASER's story is told. Please accept mine and the collective gratitude of a community you have so faithfully served.

Friends, this address is a farewell in office but not a farewell in commitment. The term of a President ends; the vocation of a citizen does not. I will continue to stand with you in the long, patient labour of making justice normal. I will continue to argue that international law is not a luxury for peaceful times but a lifeline in perilous times. I will continue to say, over and over if necessary, that we must be a voice for

the voiceless until the voiceless have voices of their own, until the structures that silenced them are reformed, and until the future they deserve is no longer deferred.

Let me leave you with a charge and a promise.

The charge is this: guard your hope. Not the fragile hope that depends on good headlines, but the resilient hope that depends on good habits. Read carefully. Show up. Disagree without contempt. Keep your commitments small enough to honour and large enough to matter. Look for the overlooked. Teach what you learn. Share the credit. Tell the truth.

The promise is this: if we do these things, we will continue to move the world by degrees. We will continue to tilt the balance of incentives toward peace and rights. We will continue to build the human infrastructure that makes treaties more than paper, courts more than buildings, and multilateralism more than a word.

Trust. Valour. Honor. These are not only our values; they are our instructions. Trust, so that our words carry weight. Valour, so that our deeds carry forward. Honor, so that both endure.

May our faith in humanity remain unbroken.

May our resolve never waver.

May we continue to be a **voice for the voiceless**, a **beacon of integrity**, and a **bridge of peace** in a world that too often forgets its shared heart.

Let history say of us that when others turned away, we leaned in; when others faltered, we stood firm; and when others doubted, we believed, in

the enduring power of justice, and in the indestructible hope of humankind.

Thank you for inviting me into your confidence, for giving me the privilege of serving as your President for the past three years and for reminding me daily that the conscience of a country is often found in the quiet work of its citizens.

May we continue, in unison, to speak with clarity, to act with courage, and to serve with humility. May we keep faith with the voiceless until they are voiceless no more. May our insistence on a better, more accountable world be as constant as justice itself.

And may the road ahead find us still seated in that circle of chairs, pouring one another tea, and plotting, patiently, persistently, and joyfully how to mend the world.

Thank you, my friends and colleagues, for the courage of your partnership, and the honour of your faith.