

OPENING ADDRESS BY UNAS SECRETARY-GENERAL YAP KWONG WENG DELIVERED AT UN-ROTARY DAY, HELD IN THE HOLIDAY INN (THE ATRIUM) ON 4 NOVEMBER 2011 AT 2015HRS

Your Excellency, Mr. Olivier Caron, Ambassador of France,

Your Excellency, Mr. Jörg Al. Reding, Ambassador of Switzerland,

Your Excellency, Mr. Nopadol Gunavibool, Ambassador of Thailand,

Your Excellency, Ms Michal Sarig-Kaduri, Deputy Chief of Mission, Israel

Mr Zainie Abdul Aucasa, Rotary District Governor District 3310,

Prof. Tham Seong Chee, President UNAS,

Prof. Rohan Gunaratna, Head of International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, RSIS,

UNAS Board of Directors; The Youth Council,

Rotarians from Singapore and Thailand,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good evening.

Please allow me to extend a warm welcome to everyone.

I am privileged to speak on this event co-hosted by UNAS and Rotary District 3310. This is the first time we are commemorating this very meaningful occasion.

Rotary and the United Nations have a long history of working together and sharing similar visions for a peaceful world. In 1942, Rotary clubs from 21 nations organized a conference in London to

develop a vision for advancing education, science, and culture after World War II. In 1945, 49 Rotarians went to San Francisco to help draft the UN Charter. Rotary and the UN have been close partners ever since.

We are here today to celebrate this friendship. We are here to recognize that what we believe in is built on camaraderie, commonality and credibility.

BUILDING COMMON BONDS

Today, Rotary holds the highest consultative status offered to a NGO by the UN's Economic and Social Council. It also works closely with a number of UN bodies, programs and agencies. Therefore, the bond between the United Nations and Rotary is historical and strong. They have common goals to serve humanity, and to promote peace and stability.

This is especially relevant when dealing with unprecedented challenges stemmed from today's climate change, ideological conflict and rapid urbanization.

The challenges of our time call for increased collaboration because the threats that we face today are interconnected and far-reaching.

CALL FOR INCREASED COLLABORATION

The famine in Somalia is likely to get worse in the coming weeks, and more are expected to die of starvation and disease. The number of acutely malnourished children in Somalia, currently at 390,000, could double within the next year. More than 12 million people across the Horn of Africa now face severe food shortages and require international assistance.

The effects of climate change have also worsened in past decade. Many scientists have predicted that the entire North Polar ice cap may be completely gone within the next few years. Sea levels are rising; storms are getting stronger, and people continue to be endangered by massive natural disasters that displace communities and threaten humanity.

Extreme weather conditions have also greatly impacted the health of forests and produced more devastating cyclones, floods, landslides, tornadoes, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Thailand's recent floods are a case in point. It has already taken more than 380 lives and disrupted thousands from living in stability.

On this note, we offer our deepest condolences for those who have died in the floods. Thailand is a land of great people, culture and traditions. We pray that your crisis will be over soon.

GLOBAL IMPACT THROUGH LOCAL ACTION

Ladies and Gentlemen, our world needs a new spirit of volunteerism to overcome wider challenges. This can be achieved through local action to create a global impact.

One-to-One. Person-to-Person. Step-by-Step. As Lao Tzu, a Chinese philosopher once said, "*A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step*".

We can start our first step by volunteering at the local levels. We can share our knowledge and experiences so that better solutions can be developed to help the needy.

In Singapore, volunteerism is rising. According to the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Center, volunteerism has risen by around 23% since 2010.

Young people from 15 to 29 are the group that is volunteering the most. They do it for a good cause. They do it for an intrinsic reason.

In the context of the UN, the target date for achieving the Millennium Development Goals is 2015. With only four years left, there is a very real chance of falling short of many of the goals.

So volunteerism is the force to turn the tides, and steer our ship to overcome all odds.

OUR KEY TO THE FUTURE – THE YOUTH

Despite the problems that the world faces, we have hope. Our hope lies in our youth – our younger generation. One that is more tech-savvy, innovative and idealistic.

As Secretary-General Ban Ki Mun said: “Young people often understand better than older generations that we can transcend our religious and cultural differences in order to reach our shared goals.”

“They are also standing up for the rights of oppressed peoples, including those who suffer discrimination based on gender, race and sexual orientation.”

Indeed, the youth are making a difference and actively engage in tackling global challenges through local action.

They are changing the global landscape by voicing out solutions and creating checks and balances.

I strongly believe in the capabilities of our youth.

This year, UNAS and its Youth Council embarked on activities that included an environment conference with Curtin University in Sarawak. We advocated for sustainable development, and the Rotarians were there with us on the sidelines supporting our work.

We also conducted a bespoke seminar that motivated “Normal Stream” students from across 15 secondary schools to engage in activities that emphasized on their strengths, not their weaknesses. Our goal is clear – we want to inspire the human spirit. We want to reach out and revitalize hearts and minds.

We engaged different civil society groups (from the disadvantaged to diplomats to the uncle living in a one-room flat). We gave out groceries for the needy in Ang Mo Kio and believe that every small action counts. We worked with the European Union Center and INSEAD to discuss critical issues in the EU today.

We co-organized the Holocaust Remembrance Day with the Israeli embassy, called our young to work towards peace – never to repeat the mistakes of history. We also conducted several local community service events where the Rotary Club of Victoria played a critical role in making it a success.

CONCLUSION

So what exactly have we learnt? We learnt how to become more human. To become more humble, empathetic and realize that the world has changed and is changing.

By engaging in local activities, we can create a global impact. It is achievable. It is do-able. We need to maintain and generate enduring relationships. In doing so, we create social capital, where others will benefit.

The power of collaboration strengthens and uplifts. It builds trust and cooperation. For UNAS and Rotary, our friendship remains strong and steadfast just as our founders did. Let us continue to work towards building a more peaceful and secure world.

On this note, I wish all of you an enjoyable evening ahead.

Thank you.