SPEECH BY THE FOREIGN SECRETARY, ROBIN COOK, TO THE 54TH SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY,
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Mr President.

Just over half a century ago, the then British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, presented the Charter of the United Nations to Parliament. He told the House of Commons: 'We are seeking not merely good relations between nations but between the human beings within nations...'

The concept which gave rise to the Charter of the United Nations was revolutionary. That responsibility for security, freedom and development does not belong solely to each state acting individually, but to all the nations of the world acting as a united body.

Over the past fifty years, the UN has done much to discharge that responsibility.

The UN and its agencies have led programmes around the world that have released the potential of individual human beings in every continent. They have helped double the literacy rate among women in developing countries. They have helped immunise 80 per cent of the world’s children against some of the most lethal diseases.

The UN has established the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the benchmark for the freedoms of individuals and this General Assembly has played a leading role insisting on equal democratic rights regardless of race and forcing an end to apartheid.

The UN has provided shelter and sanctuary to refugees in every corner of the world. As we meet this week, UN agencies provide homes, food, welfare, health and education to 19 million refugees - more than the population of most member states. We should take pride in those achievements because it will help give us the confidence to tackle the challenges that remain.

But we must also be frank about where we have failed. We have failed to deliver peace to many of the peoples of the world. We have not realised the vision of our founders - of nations and the peoples within them living in peace with each other. We have averted world war. But we have not avoided a world with too much war.

That is why I want to focus my remarks today on what we must do if we are to replace failure to halt war with success in preventing conflict. The harrowing scenes we have witnessed this past year from Kosovo, from Sierra Leone, from East Timor and too many other places underline the urgency of improving our performance in preventing conflicts and in stopping them when they have started.

I propose five priority areas for action.
First, we must tackle the root causes of conflicts, starting with the poverty that breeds it. War is becoming a poor man's burden. In the modern world, wealthy nations no longer experience the trauma of conflict on their soil. The soundest base for peace is prosperity and the best way we can prevent conflict is to promote sustainable development. The forthcoming Millennium Assembly must make a reality of the commitment to halving the proportion of people in extreme poverty and reducing the number of nations in heavy debt.

Secondly, we must promote human rights and good governance. Development of a nation will be more rapid where people have the right to develop their full potential. Conflict will be more likely where governments rule against the consent of their people.

Thirdly, we must curb the supply of weapons that fuel conflict. For decades, the UN, rightly, has focussed on halting the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Yet in the same decades, the weapons that have killed masses in conflicts have been the most common small arms. In Friday's debate in the Security Council, we have the opportunity to take forward action to halt the illegal trade in small arms, to promote regional moratoriums on them and to limit arsenals of military firearms to the official agencies of legitimate governments.

Fourthly, we must stop the illegal trade in diamonds and other precious commodities which pay for the small arms, and all too often the mercenaries, which sustain conflicts. Many of the markets for these commodities, especially in diamonds, are small and tightly located in a few centres. We must encourage cooperation with those who manage these markets to cut off the supply of funds to those who are promoting conflict.

Lastly, we must counter the culture of impunity. Those who break international humanitarian law, from Kosovo to East Timor, must know they will be held to account. The International Criminal Tribunals have shown what can be done. We must build on their work by getting a permanent International Criminal Court up and running with all speed.

But we will not always succeed in preventing conflict. We need, therefore, to be better equipped to restore peace when war breaks out.