

***FREEDOM -  
A RIGHT FOR EVERYONE  
A DUTY FOR GOVERNMENTS  
THE MISSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS***

**Speech by Uri Rosenthal, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands  
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Mr President, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

[ Introduction ]

In May I visited Tunisia, the cradle of the revolutions that have spread across the Arab world. I spoke to many people there who told me about their deep yearning for freedom. About the decades their freedom had been suppressed. And about what the revolution meant for their lives. One of them was Essma Ben Hamida, the strong-willed director of a civil society organization active in micro-finance. She said literally to me: *"If democracy would mean that I lose my rights as a woman, I do not want democracy."* In one sentence, Ms Ben Hamida defined one of the key challenges we face.

The call for freedom and democracy from the streets of the Arab world has brought about great change. It has inspired people around the world to claim their rights. But huge challenges remain. And a severe financial and economic crisis is threatening growth and trade around the globe. This crisis is undermining people's ability to earn a living and enjoy freedom to the fullest extent. It is crucial that we manage these developments and the UN and individual governments must support people's calls for freedom. Freedom is a right for everyone, a duty for governments and the mission of the United Nations.

Freedom must be supported by three key pillars: first security; second democracy and the rule of law; and third prosperity.

[ Freedom and the pillar of security]

Lack of security is a fundamental threat to people's freedom. Providing security is a responsibility of governments and of the international community as a whole.

- In March this year, we rose to the challenge. Security Council Resolution 1973 on Libya was truly historic. It explicitly referred to the international community's Responsibility to Protect. It highlighted the UN's indispensable role.
- By contrast, I should add the Council's failure to reach consensus on Syria has been at great human cost. Everyday we are shocked by new horrific stories. Peaceful demonstrators were carrying a sign this very weekend, which read: *"Help Syria. It is bleeding."* We need to listen to the people of Syria. We need to stop President Assad's government from brutally murdering his own citizens in an attempt to crush their legitimate call for freedom and I urge all members of the Security Council of the UN to act decisively and agree on targeted sanctions against the regime.
- Freedom and security are also key issues in the Middle East Peace Process. If we do want peace, we need direct negotiations now, not new resolutions at the UN. The Netherlands endorses the time frame outlined by the Quartet and stands ready to assist wherever we can. We are a major donor to the Palestinian authority. We fully support the ambition of the Palestinian people to build a viable, democratic and peaceful Palestinian state. But this cannot be viewed separately from the Israeli people's desire to live in a secure, internationally recognized Jewish state in peace with their neighbors. It is really essential that the two parties invest in mutual confidence, that they do refrain from unilateral steps and find a solution together. They should be prepared to make the difficult and painful concessions necessary for the fulfillment of their peoples' aspirations. I talked with President Abbas. I talked with Prime Minister Netanyahu. I listened

carefully to what they had to say. The message is simple and clear: negotiate, negotiate, negotiate.

[ Freedom and the pillar of democracy and rule of law ]

Democracy and the rule of law are the best guarantees for freedom. But they require hard work. As Francis Fukuyama put it in his latest book, *“Liberal democracy is more than majority voting in elections. It is a complex set of institutions that restrain and regularize the exercise of power through law and a system of checks and balances.”*<sup>[1]</sup> That is what it is about.

- I do admire the tremendous courage that people – young and old – have shown to claim their individual liberty and democratic rights. We must support their efforts to build truly democratic societies governed by the rule of law. The UN should play a leading role by helping with institution-building and developing the rule of law. To that effect, Slovakia and the Netherlands, for their part, are co-chairing the Community of Democracies’ task force that is supporting Tunisia’s democratic transition.
- The international community should also support internet access that is free and uncensored. This is an essential tool for people to exercise their freedom of expression. We should take great care to make sure people can use it. Countries supporting this cause should really unite around that issue.
- As Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recently said, I quote literally, *“Countries do not become fit for democracy – they become fit through democracy.”*<sup>[2]</sup> Democracy means freedom and equal rights for everyone. It provides opportunities to empower women. Women represent fifty per cent of the world’s human capital. It is in every country’s own interest to ensure that women take an active role in society and the economy, as well as in the political power structures. I am convinced that, in free and fair elections, extremists who want to take away women’s rights will not succeed. Real democracy also means that the rights of religious groups, including Christians, are respected. Society as a whole should be tolerant towards the other, towards those with other religions and beliefs. There should be no doubt about that.

[ Freedom and the pillar of prosperity ]

Freedom offers the best route to prosperity. The ongoing global economic crisis is affecting prosperity everywhere in our world.

- Enabling free trade is vital to economic recovery. Market access is crucial for private sector development. Breaking down the barriers for trade in agricultural products can galvanize entrepreneurship in the countries which are really needing it the most. The Arab region in particular should benefit from enhanced export opportunities to the EU. The beauty of well-regulated free trade is that it is not a zero-sum game – it benefits everyone and it is part and parcel of freedom. This is why the WTO Doha Round must succeed. The world should and can not revert to protectionism. The WTO has an important part to play in preventing this. The EU is also ambitiously negotiating free trade agreements with various partners. Of course, these agreements should fit within the multilateral system.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York, 2011).

<sup>[2]</sup> Ban Ki-moon, message to mark International Democracy Day, New York, 15 September 2011.

- Free trade leads to economic growth, which in turn should also benefit the poorest countries in this world. To further support their growth, we should enhance their access to education, vocational training and micro-finance for women and the poor.

[ Freedom: the mission of the UN ]

Freedom belongs to all of us. Those who have fought to gain their freedom will never give it up. Freedom must be supported through security, democracy and the rule of law, and prosperity. We can achieve this through the joint efforts of the UN member states. Since the UN is the international forum where global issues and actors come together, it is here at the UN that we must join forces. We are witnessing international developments unfolding more rapidly than ever before. The UN needs to adapt to maintain its important role in international relations.

- For that matter, the Security Council should better reflect changing international relations and economic realities. The Netherlands does support a modest enlargement of the Security Council. But with a limit on the right of veto in order not to undermine the effectiveness of the Council's decision-making process.
- The Netherlands supports the Secretary-General's drive for budgetary discipline. We have to make careful choices on what to finance and what *not* to finance. I also urge emerging economies to take their share of responsibility for the sustainability of UN funding.
- The UN has an essential role in fostering the rule of law around the world, as well as in preventative diplomacy and mediation. The Netherlands will play its part, including through the role of The Hague as the international city of peace and justice. The Peace Palace, international courts and legal institutions attest to our long tradition of international law and active role in its practice. A tradition that goes back to Grotius' early 17th-century *Mare Liberum*, which laid the foundation for international law.

I would like to congratulate Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on his re-election. And I call on him to use the overwhelming support for his second term as a mandate to reform the UN. A strong and active UN is essential in a world in which no country can shape the future single-handedly. To succeed, public support for the UN is crucial. Clear, tangible results are necessary to sustain governments' commitment to the UN. An effective and efficient UN is in the national interests of all its member states and is indeed essential for freedom.

Ladies and gentlemen, through our efforts at the UN we can support the calls for freedom around the world. Then, on my next visit to Tunisia, Essma Ben Hamida, a strong-willed woman, can hopefully tell me that freedom has brought her both democracy *and* her rights and empowerment as a woman.

Thank you.