

New York, October 1947 – open letter

TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE UNITED NATIONS

by Albert Einstein

As I see it, this is the way for the nations of the world to break the vicious circle which threatens the continued existence of mankind, as no other situation in human history has ever done.

We are caught in a situation in which every citizen of every country, his children, and his life's work, are threatened by the terrible insecurity which reigns in our world today. The progress of technological development has not increased the stability and the welfare of humanity. Because of our inability to solve the problem of international organization, it has actually contributed to the dangers which threaten peace and the very existence of mankind.

The delegates of fifty-five Governments, meeting in the second General Assembly of the United Nations, undoubtedly will be aware of the fact that during the last two years - since the victory over the Axis powers - no appreciable progress has been made either toward the prevention of war or toward agreement in specific fields such as control of atomic energy and economic cooperation in the reconstruction of war-devastated areas.

The United Nations cannot be blamed for these failures. No international organization can be stronger than the constitutional powers given it, or than its component parts want it to be. As a matter of fact, the United Nations is an extremely important and useful institution provided the peoples and Governments of the world realize that it is merely a transitional system toward the final goal, which is the establishment of a supranational authority vested with sufficient legislative and executive powers to keep the peace. The present impact lies in the fact that there is no sufficient, reliable supra-national authority. Thus the responsible leaders of all Governments are obliged to act on the assumption of eventual war. Every step motivated by that assumption contributes to the general fear and distrust and hastens the final catastrophe. However, strong national armaments may be they do not create military security for any nation nor do they guarantee the maintenance of peace.

There can never be complete agreement on international control and the administration of atomic energy or on general disarmament until there is a modification of the traditional concept of national sovereignty. For as long as atomic energy and armaments are considered a vital part of national security no nation will give more than lip service to international treaties. Security is indivisible. It can be reached only when necessary guarantees of law and enforcement obtain everywhere, so that military security is no longer the problem of any single state. There is no compromise possible between preparation for war, on the one hand, and preparation of a world society based on law and order on the other.

Every citizen must make up his mind. If he accepts the premise of war, he must reconcile himself to the maintenance of troops in strategic areas like Austria and Korea; to the sending of troops to Greece and Bulgaria; to the accumulation of stockpiles of uranium by whatever means; to universal military training, to the progressive limitation of civil liberties. Above all, he must endure the consequences of military secrecy which is one of the worst scourges of our time and one of the greatest obstacles to cultural betterment.

If on the other hand every citizen realizes that the only guarantee for security and peace in this atomic age is the constant development of a supra-national government, then he will do everything in his power to strengthen the United Nations. It seems to me that every reasonable and responsible citizen in the world must know where his choice lies.

Yet the world at large finds itself in a vicious circle since the United Nations powers seem to be incapable of making up their minds on this score. The Eastern and Western blocs each attempt frantically to strengthen their respective power positions. Universal military training, Russian troops in Eastern Europe, United States control over the Pacific Islands, even the stiffening colonial policies of the Netherlands, Great Britain and France, atomic and military secrecy - are all part of the old familiar jockeying for position.

THE TIME has come for the United Nations to strengthen its moral authority by bold decisions. First, the authority of the General Assembly must be increased so that the Security Council as well as all other bodies of the United Nations will be subordinated to it. As long as there is a conflict of authority between the Assembly and the Security Council, the effectiveness of the whole institution will remain necessarily impaired.

Second, the method of representation at the United Nations should be considerably modified. The present method of selection by government appointment does not leave any real freedom to the appointee. Furthermore, selection by governments cannot give the peoples of the world the feeling of being fairly and proportionately represented. The moral authority of the United Nations would be considerably enhanced if the delegates were elected directly by the people. Were they responsible to an electorate, they would have much more freedom to follow their consciences. Thus we could hope for more statesmen and fewer diplomats.

Third, the General Assembly should remain in session throughout the critical period of transition. By staying constantly on the job, the Assembly could fulfill two major tasks: first it could take the initiative toward the establishment of a supra-national order; second, it could take quick and effective steps in all those danger areas (such as currently exist on the Greek border) where peace is threatened.

The Assembly, in view of these high tasks, should not delegate its powers to the Security Council, especially while that body is paralysed by the shortcomings of the veto provisions. As the only body competent to take the initiative boldly and resolutely, the United Nations must act with utmost speed to create the necessary conditions for international security by laying the foundations for a real world government.

OF COURSE there will be opposition. It is by no means certain that the USSR - which is often represented as the main antagonist to the idea of world Government - would maintain its opposition if an equitable offer providing for real security were made. Even assuming that Russia is now opposed to the idea of world Government, once she becomes convinced that world government is nonetheless in the making her whole attitude may change. She may then insist on only the necessary guarantees of equality before the law so as to avoid finding herself in perennial minority as in the present Security Council.

Nevertheless, we must assume that despite all efforts Russia and her allies may still find it advisable to stay out of such a world Government. In that case, and only after all efforts have been made in utmost sincerity to obtain the cooperation of Russia and her allies - the other countries would have to proceed alone. It is of the utmost importance that this partial world Government be very strong, comprising at least two-thirds of the major industrial and economic areas of the world. Such strength in itself would make it possible for the partial world Government to abandon military secrecy and all the other practices born of insecurity.

Such a partial world Government should make it clear from the beginning that its doors remain wide open to any non-member - particularly Russia - for participation on the basis of complete equality. In my opinion, the partial world Government should accept the presence of observers from non-member governments at all its meetings and constitutional conventions.

IN ORDER to achieve the final aim - which is one world, and not two hostile worlds - such a partial world Government must never act as an alliance against the rest of the world. The only real step toward world government is world Government itself.

In a world Government the ideological differences between the various component parts are of no grave consequence. I am convinced that the present difficulties between the USA and the USSR are not due primarily to ideological differences. Of course, these ideological differences are a contributing element in an already serious tension. But I am convinced that even if the USA and Russia were both capitalist countries - or communist, or monarchist, for that matter - their rivalries, conflicting interests and jealousies would result in strains similar to those existing between the two countries today.

The United Nations now and world Government eventually must serve one single goal the guarantee of the security, tranquillity, and the welfare of all mankind.

signed by A. Einstein