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The rule of law at the national and international levels

Global health and foreign policy

Letter dated 25 March 2020 from the representatives of Angola, Cambodia, China, Cuba, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Dominica, Grenada, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Myanmar, Nicaragua, the Russian Federation, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Sri Lanka, the Sudan, Suriname, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Zimbabwe to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council

Upon instructions from and on behalf of our respective Ministers for Foreign Affairs, and in response to your most recent callings, we take the opportunity to address you on a matter of utmost importance and great urgency, as is the global health crisis arising from COVID-19, which was recently declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO).

For the past months we have all been following very closely the developments related to the coronavirus, including its rapid spread and the large human toll it has had thus far, as well as the impact it is having on affected countries, particularly on the most vulnerable sectors of society. This is, without a doubt, the greatest public health emergency of our times, which, although taking place at a time when multilateralism is under attack, provides a unique opportunity for multilateralism to succeed and be strengthened at this time of global crisis and uncertainty.

As you recently stated, “more than ever before, we need solidarity, hope and the political will to see this crisis through together”, as nations truly united. In order to do so effectively, nonetheless, we must join efforts and act in a collective, coordinated and decisive manner, as responsible members of the international community. It is our common responsibility not only to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, as we committed ourselves to when we signed the founding Charter of the United Nations, but also to ensure the timely adoption of policies and strategies to save our very own and present generation, and to give them both hope and reassurance for their well-being, stability and prosperity.

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At home, our national Governments have all been acting responsibly, including through the adoption of necessary precautionary measures to both contain the spread of and fight the coronavirus. We have also advanced in the design of contingency plans to ensure, among other things, the functioning of basic services and emergency response systems at the current juncture. Similarly, as you are aware, we have been working with the United Nations system to strengthen our cooperation programmes, as well as with other partners to learn from their experiences and share best practices. Despite all this, we recognize that much still needs to be done, in order to be successful in this battle.

Today, we have a common enemy: COVID-19. And, as you have recognized, it is time to “gear up, step up and scale up”. Our national Governments have the political and moral will to move in that direction; our dedicated and professional physicians and medical care providers are fully capable to serve in this time of need; and our peoples are ready to do their part, as we are all aware that this historical time calls for the greatest level of solidarity, cooperation and collaboration with one another.

Nonetheless, we have to recognize that this is a hard – if not impossible – deed for those countries that are currently facing the application of unilateral coercive measures, which are illegal and blatantly violate international law and the Charter of the United Nations. The destructive impact of said measures at the national level, plus their extraterritorial implications, together with the phenomena of overcompliance and the fear of “secondary sanctions”, hinder the ability of national Governments to, among other things, have regular access to the international financial system or to free trade; thus, undermining ongoing efforts of national Governments to attack COVID-19, especially in relation to the effective and timely procurement of medical equipment and supplies, including testing kits and medications, which are vital for attending to and treating patients, as recently recognized by the Director General of WHO. In addition, the sanctions also have a direct negative impact on, among other things, the human rights to life, health and food of the peoples subjected to them. Ultimately, these measures also affect the essential cooperation and solidarity that should prevail between nations.

Today, in the midst of the global pandemic resulting from the coronavirus, said negative impact on the welfare of our peoples and countries is being further aggravated and multiplied. Hence, the urgent need for the international community, including the United Nations, to reaffirm their commitment with the concept of “We, the Peoples of the United Nations”. Let us recall that, as per the conclusions of United Nations independent experts, the promulgation and application of unilateral coercive measures affect over one third of humankind.

In the light of the above, we respectfully urge you to request the complete and immediate lifting of such illegal, coercive and arbitrary measures of economic pressure – in line with the long-standing and principled position of the United Nations to reject unilateral coercive measures – in order to ensure the full, effective and efficient response of all members of the international community to the coronavirus, and to also reject the politicization of such a pandemic. This joint appeal we are making today, and of which we expect a positive response from your side, is, as you are well aware, supported by the provisions of an important number of relevant resolutions of the General Assembly, thus, providing a solid basis for any action on your part.

As you are well aware, we live in an interconnected world; hence, in the context of a global pandemic, “impeding medical efforts in one country heightens the risk for all of us”, which is why – as has been recently recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights – we must avoid the collapse of any country’s medical and health system as a result of the application of illegal sanctions. Therefore, we cannot allow political calculations to get in the way of saving human lives. This is a time, as you have stated over and over again, not for fostering chaos, but for

global solidarity, cooperation and prudence; for joining efforts at the national, regional and international levels, without any kind of discrimination, if we really want to overcome this complex human crisis and its economic impact; and for recommitting ourselves to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and our pledge to leave no one behind.

Similarly, we shall also stress the need to, in the current juncture, strengthen national economies in a way that provides national Governments, as well as the public and private sectors, the ability to support and finance the necessary plans and strategies to ensure the containment of the spread of COVID-19. In this regard, we agree that, as you have recently stated, “more than ever, Governments must cooperate to revitalize economies, expand public investment, boost trade, and ensure targeted support for the people and communities most affected by the disease or more vulnerable to the negative economic impact” and that measures need to be urgently taken to “alleviate the debt burden of the most vulnerable countries (...) and to ensure adequate financial facilities to support countries in difficulties”. This is of utmost importance, especially for countries that, apart from now having to deal with the coronavirus, have also to deal with other exceptional circumstances, such as the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures.

In addition, we seize this opportunity to convey to you our appreciation for the work that is currently being carried out by the United Nations system and for the very valuable support that is being provided to our nations, most notably by WHO, as we respond to this global crisis, which we are confident we will overcome together and emerge from stronger.

Lastly, we respectfully request your good offices to circulate the present letter as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda items 83 and 126, and of the Security Council. We are confident that you will pay proper attention to the serious concerns transmitted herein.

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