

Full Transcript of Press Briefing by H.E. Annalena Baerbock

President of the 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly

Palais des Nations, Geneva

24 February 2026

(Near Verbatim)

Good morning and as this is my first time to address you as President of the General Assembly here in Geneva, I would like to thank you for being here as the UN press corps and also to get into the exchange.

As we are having this briefing on the 24th of February I would like to start with a flashback. Four years ago, people in Europe woke up in another world because generations like mine have always had the privilege to live a life in peace. But this changed four years ago with the full invasion of Russia of the neighboring country of Ukraine. And within these four years the world has turned, but the situation for the millions of Ukrainians, millions of children has remained the same. And I will never forget one teenager's voice who I met in Kharkiv, just 40 kilometers from the Russian border, also on a cold winter's day of minus 15 degrees. And she said we fled to Italy, but we could not stay, seeing from outside our friends and relatives dying. Ukraine is my home, so she returned. I don't know if she is still alive because what I learned there as well is that in some parts of Ukraine you don't have time to get into shelters. They told me count to 40 and if you're still alive you made it because with rockets being shot over the border there is no time in many places to find a safer place.

This also meant that these teenage girls and all the other children could not go to school and her only wish was I would just like to play volleyball again like every girl in Europe.

So, while the world has turned in the last four years, we should never get used to war. We should work every day for peace, even in the darkest hours, not only in Ukraine but everywhere else around the world. Every child around the world has the right to go to school and not to count until 40 to see if she or he is still alive.

And this is why, especially here in Geneva, where there is the international place for human rights, it is so important to underline that we need an immediate, full, and unconditional ceasefire. This war needs to finally end.

And let me also reiterate: any peace agreement must be grounded in the UN Charter, international law and General Assembly resolutions meaning respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Ukraine.

This is the clear, resolute, and unwavering position of the UN General Assembly, and this is the only path to a comprehensive, just, and lasting peace.

When I addressed the opening of the 61st session of the Human Rights Council yesterday I called on Member States not to be silent bystanders when injustice unfolds, when human rights are attacked because we saw it in Ukraine, but we saw it also in so many other places around the world. Human rights violations, the attack on the dignity of people, are the first alarming signals of further horror to follow.

Therefore, we all need to protect and defend universal human rights and reaffirm that human rights are indivisible and interconnected with the other pillars of our work: peace and security, and development.

Therefore, I urged Member States to uphold human rights not only here in Geneva or New York but also at the national level, in Gaza and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, in Ukraine, Sudan and Myanmar and so many other places around the world - everywhere, every day.

And above all, to promote and protect women's rights as human rights. Because women's rights are the indicator for the state of society. We see that in the most horrible dimension in Afghanistan, another forgotten crisis. In Afghanistan women and girls are facing the most severe, systematic human rights attacks. And we can also see, and I underlined that

yesterday, that shying away from human rights abuses will never change it to the better, always to the worse.

From girls being denied schooling in Afghanistan and now being treated as second class humans, which doesn't exist in international law, but also to child marriage in Sahel, a woman shot in the face in Iran simply for demonstrating peacefully, and grandmothers reliving the horrors of sexual violence again and again in so many places.

Attacks on the rights of women and girls are a signal of a broader rollback on human rights.

Human rights, and women's rights, are the benchmark for the state of a society. In this regard I would like to underline again that human rights are fundamental to the UN, not new demands, not optional. As we are celebrating the 80th year of the General Assembly and soon of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights there have been women's rights as human rights from the beginning. It says all humans, not all men.

Therefore, my main priority for the remainder of my time as President of the General Assembly is to defend this institution, its Charter, and the principles enshrined in it, because as human rights are under attack it is also the whole UN system.

And I call on Member States not only here in Geneva but everywhere I go, to step up and stand up, to show leadership, to take a principled stand and to come together to build cross-regional alliances to protect and promote the principles of the Charter because they are the life insurance of most of countries around the world.

Another key priority will be the UN80 reform process, and I had the honor of debating with all the permanent representatives here in Geneva the different reform steps. This is an essential process, and it is more than just being more efficient. It's making this 80-year-old institution more modern, more agile, more effective to deliver on the ground.

This includes also the selection process of the next Secretary-General, which will also fall into this session's term. The interactive dialogues will start on 20 April and again I would like to invite you also as correspondents here in Geneva to engage intensively in this process because the person we choose will be the face of the United Nations in the future.

For sure in these fragmented times, none of this is easy, and it can't be done alone. The motto for the 80th session of the UNGA is Better Together, and when I chose this motto before being elected as PGA I didn't know how important this motto would be, but we see it all around the world; no one can face these challenges globally alone.

So being better together is also a motto underlining that there are so many fields in a positive way where joining hands makes you stronger, makes you better together. Our campaign is being showcased in the Palais des Nations this week, so if you go around, you will see very important messages showing that the United Nations is saving lives every day, and I think this is the most noble thing you can do.

I thank you.

Question: Thank you for the briefing. Yesterday, in your speech, you stressed a lot on the importance this time for the Member States to choose a woman as the next Secretary-General. Does that mean that you're worried that they might go for another choice again this time, or was it just a reminder? And then quickly, here in Geneva, some voices are starting to mount, to criticise the fact that some leaders could not come to the high-level week last time, and because of that UN General Assembly should be moved to Geneva. What do you think about it?

Annalena Baerbock, President of the United Nations General Assembly: As a President of the General Assembly, I don't represent my personal views but the call of the Member States. And the good thing is that in these fragmented times, 193 Member States agreed last year on the resolution on revitalisation, that they called, all together, to strongly encourage the nomination of women. And this is the call I'm repeating everywhere I go, because we are also living in a world of realpolitik. Especially women have experienced that sometimes there are strong calls, but the closer the decision comes, then suddenly it's

being forgotten, not only that there has been a call, but also that half of the population, indeed, are women. And I'm obviously also a woman, only the fifth, by the way, as President of the General Assembly, so you can see that also the UN has not delivered on its promise of equal representation, but we are working on it.

I know also myself that it's sometimes no coincidence that suddenly, new questions are arising. In my case, when I was running for different positions — “are you not too young?” Others are now rising — “Well, are you not too old?” And interestingly enough, these questions are being heard way more for women than for men. Then this is why I'm raising also the alarming bells, so that everybody is reminded what they together called for in their joint resolution.

With regard to the second question, again, unfortunately, we don't live in a perfect world. The rules are crystal clear that, obviously, the United Nations is a place where everybody has a seat and a voice at the table, meaning that they have to be able to come to the different meeting places. Yet I would like to underline that also in the past, we had unfortunately the situation that these rules have been not followed all the time. Therefore, the Secretary-General and myself, we called also at the last UN General Assembly on the host country to comply with the rules of the United Nations. And if needed, we will do that again also in the future.

Yet, I would like to add, because I'm a fan of being very open and not sugar coating with easy solutions, because we are in the midst of the UN80 reform — as you always say, the devil lies in details. In principle, it sounds very easy to move meetings; to say, well, let's meet at another place. In reality, logistics also matter. So, we have had also here situations, for example in the UN80 debate, where some meeting places are more expensive than others, so [some have said] “let's meet somewhere else in the world.” But if in these places, you don't have interpretation, you don't have meeting rooms which are big enough, you don't have the security — in my own home country, we have the problem of flight connections at different meeting places. So therefore, some of the easy proposals sometimes sound very simple, but in reality, they are very, very hard to implement. Then also, de facto, everybody could reach other places due to logistics.

Question: Good morning. Secretary-General Guterres warned last month of imminent financial collapse. Since then, the US has paid 160 million of over 4 billion owed. That's obviously a small fraction. Are we still heading for a financial collapse? And can we afford the UN General Assembly this year? And secondly, on Ukraine, since you began with that, typically there's a resolution, I understand, on the anniversary in New York, condemning Russian aggression. What is the situation this year? Is there such a resolution? How does it differ from previous years? And what message does that send on support for Ukraine, four years into the war? Thank you.

Annalena Baerbock, President of the United Nations General Assembly: Thank you very much. With regard to the contributions, again, the UN regulations are crystal clear. Every Member State has to pay its contribution in full and in time. And 160 million is obviously not in full. This is why we regularly call, also in the General Assembly, on Member States to pay their contributions in full and in time.

And as you mentioned, we have a severe liquidity crisis. I would like to underline that this is not simple figures and numbers. This is about people dying. If we have to cut humanitarian aid by 20 per cent, if we have withdrawal, especially from the World Health Organization, but also less funding of the World Food Programme, this means literally that especially infants are dying, because special nutrition for infants, for children, is what the UN is mainly delivering in places of crisis. And if we cut 20 per cent of this delivery, 20 per cent of infants won't survive. So, we are speaking about real people here.

Therefore, my call, together with the Secretary-General, is on every Member State to pay in full and on time, but also, if we are facing this liquidity crisis, on every other Member State — who we are thankful for that they pay their contributions as they should — to look at voluntary funding. But also, I called on the European Union, for example, in my speech just two weeks ago in Strasbourg, to reconsider again the financial rule, which means that the UN has to pay back money which has not been spent, even though if this money never reached the UN because Member States did not pay it, meaning that we have even more severe cuts because of the non-payment. And this is a decision which could be taken by Member States to waive, for a certain amount of time, this unlimited reimbursement of money which never was paid in the first place. And again, I call on Member States to consider these options because the UN is the “United Nations” of all the Member States, so it lies in all of their hands.

With regard to Ukraine, yes, we have the meetings today and tomorrow in New York, and there is a text being circulated requesting not only for a meeting, but also a short text which expresses concern that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation has persisted for four years and continues to have devastating and long-lasting consequences. It has three key operative paragraphs. It calls, like before, for an immediate and full unconditional ceasefire between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. It reiterates its call for comprehensive, just and lasting peace in line with the international law, including the UN Charter. And it reiterates the call for the complete exchange of prisoners of war, the release of all unlawfully detained persons, and the return of all internees and civilians forcibly transferred and deported, including children, as significant confidence measures. And it will be up to Member States whether they adopt this text today in New York.

Question: Thank you for the briefing. My question is about UN80. Could you elaborate a little bit further on what you'd like to see this year from the process? We've already seen some results last year. This is the last year also of the Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. So what would you like to see at the end of the year in terms of results from this lengthy process? Thank you.

Annalena Baerbock, President of the United Nations General Assembly: First of all, this is work in process. Like with any institutional reform, it's not that you do some action, then it's over. It's a lifelong process. Unfortunately, we haven't done it over the last 80 years as intensively as it should have been. And therefore, we have to do now some steps which are overdue. As you probably know, they are the three work streams. For the moment, we could succeed in preventing the liquidity crisis, as the fiscal committee could agree on the budget currently. But as your colleague mentioned, we are facing the situation again. So, the most important task is to avoid the liquidity crisis, as I mentioned before.

Then within work stream two, the responsibility, especially also for the General Assembly — I've appointed two co-chairs from New Zealand and Jamaica, and we are intensively turning every stone in the work of the General Assembly. This starts by limiting speaking time, because every minute costs. If you translate speeches by 193 Member States in the different official languages, you have interpretation, you have paperwork. So, these are the low-hanging fruits.

Other parts are the mandates. We have thousands of mandates over the 80 years, unfortunately without sunset clauses. So, there's a strong call by many Member States to review these mandates again, also to avoid duplications, which I addressed yesterday, especially between New York and Geneva — in this case with regard to the third pillar of human rights, duplication between the Human Rights Council and the Third Committee.

With regard to the third workstream, looking at the different agencies — again, a very important topic here also for Geneva, because we have so many specialised bodies and agencies here. So, the proposal is on the table, for example, for mergers, looking where agencies over the year developed duplications and could be more efficient if they joined hands together. One very important aspect for the Secretariat, the Secretary-General, the Deputy Secretary-General and myself is about the Resident Coordinators, because on the ground, it's about implementation. So, if you have 10 or sometimes even more different agencies working on the ground, everybody has their own car. Again, it sounds very small and simple, but in numbers, it really, really can save a lot of money and make the work more efficient.

So, implementing on all the three different work streams is key. And the more we can succeed in this session, the better it is, because obviously with a change to a new Secretary-General and the whole new team in the Secretariat, it will be a bit more difficult.

Question: Yes, good morning. Thank you, Alessandra. Thank you for the opportunity. I saw, too, much sympathy with children from Ukraine and women from Afghanistan and Iran, and we all have this sympathy. But may I remind you of what you said in Bundestag in October 2024, and I quote you, Madam, “civilian areas in Gaza can lose their protected status when Hamas fighters hide among the people.” Do you still have the same position today? After being the President of UN General Assembly and maybe more familiar with the international law and Geneva Convention, do you still have the same position? And do you see any differences between children from Gaza and women from Gaza and other civilians in other wars? Thank you.

Annalena Baerbock, *President of the United Nations General Assembly*: No, not at all. And as you were quoting, or partly quoting, from the past, there have been many quotes for myself also in the past, especially in the context of the war in Gaza and the

situation after the 7th of October, that a life is a life — that a Palestinian life is a life and an Israeli life is a life. And this is why, for me, it was so important to go there as often as I could, to the Middle East, to underline again that it's not about choosing between the life of a Palestinian child or an Israeli child. And I think this is the most important message: human rights are indivisible. They belong together. And it's the same between nations. It's not about whether children are suffering more in Ukraine or in Sudan or somewhere around the world. We have to address suffering everywhere around the world. And unfortunately, some of these crises do not even make it to the news at all. We have conflicts around the world about [which] nobody is speaking. This is why it's so important to address the different contexts of different situation. And context matters.

And this is why I said — also in New York, because I've been asked this question many times before — it was not the correct quote, especially not a quoting with regard to children in Gaza. What I said there, and I say today again, that with regard to humanitarian law, the misuse of civil places is also forbidden in international law. And I said also in the German Parliament that it brings, the institution of war, especially civilians in this horrible situation. And this is not about legalising any attacks, because I also said that civilians must be protected in international law. And this understanding has been repeated also in the current resolutions calling on Hamas to lay down its weapons, calling on Hamas to not misuse civilians and civilian protected places.

But thank you also again for raising this question, because for me, this is a very important topic. In these times where social media is just spreading short sentences out of context, it makes it very difficult to stand up for our Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Because unfortunately, there's a tendency of having debates between black and white and pretending that we have to choose between different people and different nationalities. But there's a reason that it says in our Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “all humans.” It doesn't matter which religion, which gender, or which country they belong to.

Question: Thank you. With the financial shortages which have already been spoken about and now we have this Board of Peace being set up, are you concerned that the UN General Assembly is little by little being sidelined?

Annalena Baerbock, *President of the United Nations General Assembly*: Again, the General Assembly and in this case the Security Council have been very clear. In the related

resolution, they assigned the tasks [regarding] the situation of Gaza. And for everything else regarding peace and security, we do have an international institution and a legitimate body. It's called the United Nations, and for a good reason. Every country, no matter how big or small, how rich or poor they are, have an equal place at the table and an equal voice at the table to be

represented and to make sure that all their citizens are being represented as well.

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