

PSIA Graduation - Saturday, 27 June 2026

Speech by Filippo Grandi, 11th United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2016–2025)

Bonsoir à toutes et à tous.

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak tonight at this fantastic ceremony.

Very special thanks to Sciences Po, to the Paris School of International Affairs.

Muchas gracias a ti, muy querida Arancha, por tu invitación.

And congratulations to all of you! Fantastic job, great job, really.

And congratulations for graduating in international affairs, one of the areas most under pressure in the world today. Well done, keep going!

I will start with a situation. As Arancha said, my life has not been a life of offices, but of actual action.

Now, of course, you remember the October 7 Attacks and the Israeli bombs on Gaza, millions of people forcibly displaced.

I was then the High Commissioner for Refugees, so as such, I did not have a specific mandate because that's an UNRWA mandate over Palestinians.

But there was a mandate for me, there was a task, because displaced people inside Gaza were being pushed towards the Egyptian border, as you remember.

And normally, the High Commissioner for Refugees calls for borders to be open when there is a conflict and people are at risk. But we faced – I faced – a terrible dilemma.

The dilemma was: Should I ask Egypt to open the border or not? Should I be thinking of those people that were fleeing bombs at risk of their lives?

Or should I be thinking that that way I would have been complicit with the emptying of Gaza, which was clearly the design.

It's an atrocious dilemma.

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For the sake of time, I will not elaborate any further on this specific case, but the main point remains.

A dilemma that compelled everybody to make very difficult compromises, and this is not unique to the situation of Gaza.

So when these things happen, you can either praise the humanitarians or blame the humanitarians.

But my point here is different.

My point is that to respect civilians, civilian lives, in war, is *the* key responsibility in International Humanitarian Law, and that is a responsibility of states, of political decision-makers.

It is unfair to somehow push the dilemma to the humanitarians that are there to help the people.

Actually, that's not unfair. That's plain wrong.

That situation is one example of the complexity of today's world that many of you have mentioned today, and you now, as others have said, step into this complex world. Complex in terms of international affairs.

Full at every level of such dilemmas, and this is why we need *your* energy, *your* ideas, *your* action.

A small caveat here. I am not a politician. I've never been one. I'm not even a diplomat. I'm not an academic.

I've always been a humanitarian, but don't underestimate the role and the position in which we, the humanitarians, find ourselves in the international scene.

And that story, that episode I mentioned, shows one aspect of what being a humanitarian means today.

It means having a very stark viewpoint on international affairs.

It means, and Arancha said this already, to somehow be at the center of a mirror of the failure of politics.

So, perhaps, it is a point of view that is useful in today's world.

And of course, there's many aspects of this and of the episode I told you about, but one I want to mention, one stands out.

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This passing the buck of responsibility, doesn't it mirror a world that is now without strong leadership?

And by strong, I mean strategic, I mean feasible, I mean humane and principled.

This is dramatic for me, an old humanitarian.

I can just imagine what it must mean for you, young people, grown amidst global crises: September 11, the financial downturns, climate injustice, inequalities of different kinds, the rise of artificial intelligence, and multiple conflicts.

I can just imagine what it means to be deprived of the space and motivation created by good leadership, and what it means living amidst growing mistrust and skepticism as, at the same time, bad leadership, the leadership of the populists, continues to grow as an alternative.

I imagine how tough this must be, especially for you, students of politics, of economics.

In parallel, as you all know, the multilateral project that was born out of the '40s, is more and more weak.

It gets marginalized, ostracized.

We know all of this, I don't need to elaborate. Just some reflections that may be useful today.

Why is multilateralism in crisis?

Surely, there is a political design there, we all know.

I give you one example that I know best: the dismantling of humanitarian and development aid.

This is clearly part of a supremacy effort in which sovereignty is put forward, but that is the sovereignty of the rich and powerful. That is very clear.

But we must also recognize that flaws in the post-war project exist.

It was a project that was fundamentally Western-created and Western-led, not fully trusted by what is now the majority of the world population.

Though the response to this is not to eliminate that project, but to reshape aid and cooperation.

And maybe today, in this climate of crisis, it is the time to try and reshape, to try to make it more effective, more just, to try to make it more inclusive, more local.

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And more broadly, the post-war political project, the project of, of the 1940s of international relations built with safeguards to ensure peace is also under attack by this new logic of supremacy that we see around us.

We must fight back, but clearly also we must dedicate time and energy to reforming that system, to make it more equitable – in bold words, to make it *less colonial*.

I say this deliberately to you because I think that this is a worthwhile endeavor, which I invite all of you to reflect upon and perhaps, who knows, to engage in.

And since I'm speaking here at Sciences Po, a preeminent European institution, allow me to also briefly mention Europe.

This Europe that we observe today squeezed between the US, China, maybe even Russia.

Yet, I personally believe, having observed this over all the years I've worked, that Europe can help transform those systems, in an inclusive and non-hegemonic way.

As a bridge, not as Europe first. And why this is not happening, not fully happening, maybe not happening at all yet, and the key word here is hesitation.

Hesitation to respond to U.S. bullying, hesitation and even division on what role to play in resolving conflicts. Hesitation in climate action.

Hesitation that is often presented as caution. But caution is not always wisdom.

A wise leader takes risks. Not for their own sake, but for what they believe is right.

So I hope that this can be some food for thought for those of you who are Europeans, but really and even more, for those of you who are not European.

The role of Europe as one form of engagement.

Let me conclude with a practical point. I think, and maybe not everybody will agree here, Angela Merkel was a rare example of a good leader today.

Of course, she made mistakes like any human being and like any leader, but overall, I think her example will go down in history as a positive one.

And once I had the huge privilege of standing next to her during a discussion on how Germany could raise their yearly refugee quota.

This is a pretty technical issue, but remember, it came after years in which they had taken hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, and journalists were questioning her harshly,

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and she looked at them as she would, very calmly, and she said: “Do you really think that eighty million Germans cannot give refuge to a few thousands fleeing war?”

How many leaders would have said that? How many leaders *today* would say that?

This is one small example of her leadership. Wise, reflected, but humane.

The same leadership that had drawn her to declare “*wir schaffen das*”, “*we can do it*”, when the Syrians came, in spite of the criticism, in spite of the political price that she paid.

But history will vindicate her.

History does vindicate good leadership.

And I contrast this with the current situation in which hesitation prevails.

This constant giving the populists a nod because we are unable to counter them, and leading to solutions that are cheap and wrong.

This lack of political courage and creativity.

Look what happened just a few days ago.

For the first time, Germany, the natural leader of the EU, was defeated in an election for the Security Council.

We should not be surprised by this, but we must fight to reverse.

And perhaps as power in today’s world gets more diffused – think of the internet, think of artificial intelligence, big tech– we must also think of leadership in a more diffused way.

Not only leadership of political leaders, of governments, but much more leadership in civil society, of which we are part.

Among women and men of goodwill, a *bottom-up* leadership based on engagement, on mobilization, on advocacy, driven by the commitment to defending the rights and the dignity of all people, especially the most vulnerable in every possible sense.

And in this age of hesitation, this commitment is the true leadership.

Tonight, you celebrate. And please continue to celebrate. You have gained very valuable tools of knowledge, of criticism, of judgment.

They come, as you know, with a lot of responsibility, especially in the very fraught field of international affairs.

Use them wisely. Uphold your ideals. Don't lose heart.

Be women and men of goodwill.

Thank you.