

**Symposium on “Strengthening Conflict-Sensitive Business Practices in Vulnerable and Conflict-Affected States”, 14 December 2001, New York**

**Statement by H.E. Aminu Bashir Wali, Permanent Representative of Nigeria to the United Nations**

Your Excellencies,  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel highly honored to take part in this important symposium, and more especially, to serve as chairman of this panel. I would like to thank the Government of Germany, the UN Global Compact and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation for co-sponsoring this symposium and for inviting us all to reflect on the role of business in conflict settings. The timing of the symposium couldn't be more appropriate than now, when the Secretary General has only recently presented to the General Assembly the much-awaited report of the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change.

We all appreciate that a threat to one country is a threat to the entire global system and that peace is essential for development. We also appreciate that development lies at the heart of the global agenda in which, the private sector has a pivotal role to play as engine for growth and transformation. In my view, the High Level Panel neither exaggerated nor shy away from the point that development is the indispensable foundation of a new collective security. Considering the multi-faceted nature and extent of the threats we face, all hands must be on deck to find lasting solutions to situations that threaten our existence and well-being.

Both the timing and focus of this symposium are therefore, apposite because we have an opportunity here today, to once again, exchange views on the roles and responsibilities of the main actors in the international scene. While there is no doubt that States or in other words, Governments, remain the key actors, it is not beyond debate that States are unitary actors in our globalized world. The private sector is of course, an important partner whose role cannot be ignored in the scheme of things.

Nowhere is this more manifest than in the area of conflict prevention, resolution and the management of peace. Underlying the theme of this symposium is the implicit assumption that business operators owe a certain degree of responsibility in conflict situations. When and if the operators fail to live up to expectation, their actions can impact negatively as we know too well. On the other hand, responsible business practices have also proven their mettle in dousing conflicts and contributing to peace building measures.

I am confident that the speakers assembled here would throw more light on what business operators should and should not do in conflict settings. Suffice to say that it is in the overall interest of business to operate in an environment of peace. Disruption to normal life whether due to conflict or other causes is unsettling to all and sundry as we have seen

in different parts of the world. But since this symposium is about conflict-affected countries, I would limit my comments to such situations.

Economic loss is one of several consequences of conflicts. The scale of loss differs from country to country and from one conflict to the other, but a common denominator between them is the willful waste in human lives and material often associated with all armed conflicts. Violent conflicts considerably slowdown or in some cases put a stop altogether to normal life.

Another consequence of conflict is the rollback in development gains. Empirical evidence shows that some losses in conflicts are permanent in nature. Here one is tempted to pause and question the wisdom in toiling to build only to turn around and destroy willfully or what some have termed, “flourish to perish”. Conflicts have tested the limits of civilization and sometimes pushed societies to the brink of annihilation. They have no respect for race, gender, religion or creed. We have seen this in Africa, Europe, Asia and other places. Post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation are painstaking and costly ventures.

Yet in the midst of conflict there are those who also derive economic benefits either as suppliers of material or service providers: take arms providers or suppliers of food for instance. This is the bitter-sweet milieu in which, business operates. Is it possible to overlook moral and ethical questions in all business settings?

On face value, I am afraid we cannot moralize on business practices in each and every conflict situation because the line sometimes becomes blurred between morality and necessity and between expedience and prudence. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to attempt to come to grips, as we are doing today, with the need to identify a basic minimum conduct required of business operators if we are to avoid existence in a lawless and unregulated society.

I hope that the speakers on this panel would enrich our understanding of the role and responsibility of business in conflict settings. Thankfully, the panel comprises speakers drawn from government, the private sector, non-governmental organization and labor movement, who will bring their different perspectives to bear on their individual presentations. The spirit of Monterrey is being played out in word and deed, in demonstration of the partnership and multi-stakeholder approach required to achieve sustainable development.

I look forward to the discussions and invite you all to participate actively in the interactive segment of this panel. I thank you for your attention.