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On Friday April 4, Charles University in Prague hosted a lecture by the General Secretary of the United Nations, Mr Ban Ki-moon. The lecture, entitled "The Czech Republic and the United Nations: Peace, Development and Human Rights in a Changing World", was held in the Magna Aula of the Carolinum, the hall used for Charles University's official ceremonies and graduations. Understandably, interest in the talk was high, and guests included various ambassadors, members of the press, Czech representatives to the UN, Charles University's Rector and a number of its Vice-Rectors, representatives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, along with a number of lucky students. As a journalist with iForum, I was lucky enough to obtain a seat right at front, amidst the national press and diplomatic community, and a clear view of all the proceedings.

Before the lecture Charles University's Rector, Professor Tomáš Zima, awarded Mr Ban with the gold medal of Charles University, as an expression of both friendship and respect, and in recognition of Mr Ban's work with the United Nations. Mr Ban thanked Professor Zima and the University for the award, and accepted it on behalf of the UN peacekeepers working worldwide: it is through their efforts and sacrifices that human rights and peace are protected, he said, and they are the ones who deserve awards and recognition.

Mr Ban's speech started with a focus on the Czech Republic. He praised the country as an exemplary example of the path towards democracy, referring back to the peaceful Velvet Revolution of 1989, which saw the deposition of Czechoslovakia's authoritarian Communist government. He also highlighted the work of the UN's Czech delegates, particularly in the UN Human Rights Committee, in maintaining and establishing peace worldwide. Mr Ban highlighted the continued importance of the UN and the need for peacekeeping in today's world. He spoke about the current crisis in the Ukraine, and his hopes that diplomacy and continued discussion would help to deescalate the situation.

Mr Ban moved on to discuss his main priorities for the rest of his term as UN General Secretary. The first is the fulfillment of the UN's Millennium Development Goals, established in 2000, by 2015. Although significant progress has been made in meeting the Goals, Mr Ban claimed, much more needs to be done before the Goals are met. He also highlighted the importance of combatting climate change: his frequent trips around the world in his role as General Secretary of the UN mean Mr Ban has seen first-hand the effects of climate change, and spoke of his determination to bring the issue to the top of the global agenda. He also emphasised the need for more opportunities for women, mentioning his own efforts to ensure more women were involved in leading roles in the UN during his terms as General Secretary.

Mr Ban's other main priority is the need to provide more opportunities for young people: youth, he argued, will be the leaders of tomorrow and it is the duty of today's leaders to ensure they are adequately prepared to take charge of the world. Youth today have unprecedented opportunities, he claimed, but that we need greater conviction if we are to change the world. Mr Ban ended his lecture with an appeal to his audience: for real progress to be made in the future, we must all become global citizens with a sense of responsibility for the whole world. Afterwards, Mr Ban signed Charles University's memorial book.

Mr Ban's speech was passionate and heartfelt: it was easy to hear, especially when he discussed his priorities for the UN, how strongly he felt about the issues he was discussing. On the whole, the speech was well received, although a number of students I spoke to afterwards said they felt the talk was a little too idealistic and general. Indeed, it would have been very interesting to hear Mr Ban talk more about how the changes he desired might be achieved, rather than just hearing him list problems that need solving. As the "leaders of tomorrow", the students I talked to were particularly interested in hearing more about Mr Ban's ideas on improving opportunities for youth and solving problems like widespread youth unemployment. However, despite this one criticism, it was wonderful to have the opportunity to hear Mr Ban talk, and one that I am certainly very grateful to have had.



Natalie James is an undergraduate history student at University College London, currently studying at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague. Her interests include history, literature, politics, and current affairs. She joined the online magazine iForum to become more aware of and involved in student life at Charles University in Prague, and also to meet other likeminded Erasmus students.