

OLOF Palme Award
Stockholm, Sweden January 28 2026
Acceptance speech by Judge Navi Pillay

Distinguished guests, members of the Olof Palme Foundation, and fellow advocates for peace and justice, good evening.

I am deeply honoured and excited to receive the Olof Palme Award from the Olof Palme Foundation. It is a particular pleasure to receive the award jointly with my countryman, Professor John Dugard, who is revered for his lifelong contribution towards justice and advancing International law.

For some of us, like John and I, it was a privilege to have known of Olof Palme and to have lived through his lifetime. His untimely death at the hands of an assassin robbed us of a world leader who might, had he been alive, have unstintingly championed the rights of workers, the poor and the marginalised- as he did for Black South Africans and Palestinians.

It is important to know that his words reached us in the darkest years of apartheid, and that his words similarly inspired those struggling for rights across the world. It would be unfortunate if he is remembered solely for his unresolved murder.

Today, we gather at a time of grave concern. The world is in upheaval; multilateralism, which had stood as security against unbridled unilateral illegal actions, is bending towards the political and economic interests of great powers. The rule of law, International law, human rights, and democratic norms are under attack and some say the United Nations itself is going through a crisis of legitimacy.

The spectre of nuclear weapons looms larger than it has in decades. The erosion of arms control treaties, the modernisation of nuclear arsenals, and the rising tensions among nuclear-armed states threaten to undo decades of progress. Proliferation and nuclear sabre-rattling are not relics of the past: they are present dangers, from the Korean Peninsula to Ukraine and the Middle East.

I am deeply concerned that many governments today are actively working against the international rule of law.

I believe that the international rule of law is one of humanity's greatest achievements. It is the idea that power is restrained by agreed rules, that borders do not excuse brutality, and that no state- no matter how wealthy, powerful or militarily strong- is above the law. It is what turns raw power into responsibility and force into accountability. Without it international relations collapse into a system where power dictates outcomes.

The international rule of law protects civilians in war, preserves human rights and dignity, and provides predictability between states. It gives smaller and weaker nations a voice. It offers mechanisms, such as treaties, courts and institutions-through which disputes can be resolved without violence. It is not perfect but it is far better than the alternative- chaos governed by fear.

Yet, today I see governments undermining this system from within. Some selectively follow international law when it suits their interests, and ignore it when it does not. Others openly challenge the authority of international courts, withdraw from treaties, or refuse to comply with binding rulings. In doing so, they send a dangerous message that law is optional, and accountability is negotiable.

I see governments using national security as a shield for unlawful actions, eroding protection for civilians, refugees, workers and prisoners. I see disinformation campaigns designed to weaken trust in international institutions. I see vetoes, delays and political pressure used, not to uphold justice, but to prevent it. These unlawful actions do not merely weaken international law-they hollow it out.

What troubles me most is the precedent it sets. When powerful states disregard the rules, they normalise lawlessness. They invite others to do the same-and when international law becomes selective, it ceases to be law at all- it becomes a tool of convenience.

I want to be clear: defending the international rule of law is not about opposing sovereignty. It is about recognising that sovereignty comes with obligations. It is about understanding that long-term security and peace cannot be built on impunity, and that peace cannot survive without justice. It is to say that no nation, no leader, has the right to hold humanity hostage.

I believe the choice before us is stark. We can continue down a path where rules are bent, ignored, or rewritten by those with power or we can re-commit to a global order grounded in law, accountability, and shared humanity. We can reaffirm the equal dignity of all people.

Without a doubt, Olaf Palme would have chosen the latter. I choose the latter. Because, without the international rule of law, there is no protection for the vulnerable, no restraint on violence, and no credible promise of peace. And once it is lost, rebuilding it may be more difficult than we imagine.