

**SPEECH BY HE JUDGE IWASAWA YUJI, PRESIDENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL
COURT OF JUSTICE, AT THE SOLEMN SITTING HELD TO MARK
THE COURT'S EIGHTIETH ANNIVERSARY,
THE HAGUE, 17 APRIL 2026**

Excellencies,

It is a great honour to address you on the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of the inaugural sitting of the International Court of Justice.

The Court was established in 1945 as the principal judicial organ of the United Nations. It was created at a defining moment in history, with the unshakable conviction that relations between States should be governed by law, not by force.

Over the last 80 years, the international community has grown in size and diversity. International law has developed and expanded, and the questions that come before the Court are often more complex and different from those imagined in 1945.

And yet, one thing has not changed — the need for peaceful means to resolve disputes between States on the basis of law.

The Court has contributed significantly to this mission. Its jurisprudence has evolved, an increasing number of States have accepted its jurisdiction, and its work has helped to clarify and strengthen international law.

The past 80 years have exhibited a meaningful record of achievement. It is a record not of headlines, but of steady and principled work, reflecting the care of the judges, the dedication of the Registry, and the trust placed in the Court by States and international organizations.

Excellencies,

This is, however, not a moment for complacency. It is a moment for vigilance.

There are troubling signs of disengagement from international obligations, growing resistance to compliance, and increasing scepticism about the value of multilateralism. In some cases, the role of law itself has been openly questioned.

These trends place great pressure on the system we serve and remind us that the international rule of law cannot be taken for granted. It must be chosen, reaffirmed and defended. Our continued commitment and collective resolve to uphold it are indispensable.

The Court responds to these challenges by carrying out its judicial function — by interpreting and applying international law rigorously and in good faith.

At the heart of its mission lies the principle of equality. All States, large and small, stand before the Court on an equal footing. In this Great Hall of Justice, equality is not merely an aspiration but a reality. In each case, the Court respects the consent of States and ensures procedural fairness. This is what gives the institution its legitimacy and enduring strength.

Even when the Court's decisions do not fully resolve an underlying dispute, they remain important. They clarify the legal situation, reduce uncertainty, and give States a common basis on which to engage with one another. In this way, the decisions of the Court assist States in managing their differences, maintaining dialogue, and seeking solutions through peaceful means.

However, as a court of law, the Court can do no more than decide the questions before it in accordance with its judicial function. Many disputes brought before the Court extend beyond legal questions. While international law provides an essential framework for clarifying rights and obligations, it cannot, on its own, resolve every problem.

Lasting solutions require more than legal answers. They require co-operation and the will to act. The law can show the path, but States must choose to follow it.

The strength of the international legal system does not rest primarily on the Court. States retain the central role. The rule of law depends on a shared commitment by States to respect agreements and to turn to the law when differences arise.

Excellencies,

Today's eightieth anniversary should be an occasion to renew our commitment to international law. The rule of law is not a condition that can be achieved once and for all. It is a continuous endeavour that must be maintained and strengthened over time.

As the Court embarks upon the tasks that lie before it, it remains committed to its role. It will continue to offer a fair and impartial forum for the peaceful settlement of disputes. It will continue to provide guidance on international law. And it will continue to support a stable and predictable legal order.

The rule of law will endure only if we choose to uphold it consistently and collectively in the service of peace and justice.

Thank you.
