



UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Geography Admissions Test (GAT)

SPECIMEN PAPER A

Part C example essay

Study the passage of text, which is an extract from a speech made by UN Secretary-General António Guterres at the COP26 World Leaders Summit in November 2021. Then write an essay in response to the following question:

What can we learn from this speech about the United Nations' stance towards tackling the problem of climate change?

Your answer should be based primarily on the material in the passage; no additional credit will be given for reference to material outside the passage.

Guterres' speech is rousing and direct – a break from the usual bureaucracy-speak of the UN – which highlights how the UN is urgently addressing the climate crisis. The phrase “it’s time to say: enough” reinforces how the UN is perhaps annoyed by its member nations not doing enough to address climate change and “treating nature like a toilet” instead. However, his speech is also emphatic about the human impacts of climate change, with his short, bleak declaration that “we are digging our own graves” indicating that global warming is a deadly issue with rapid consequences. This implies that the UN does not have enough power in halting the effects of anthropogenic climate change currently.

Guterres critiques his own institution's inadequacy in addressing climate change by highlighting “serious questions” about countries' recent pledges and stating that it is an “illusion” that “recent climate action announcements” will actually succeed. This suggests that the UN recognises the problems wrought by international diplomacy and countries'

unwillingness to cooperate, but also how climate goals can be misconstrued and figures manipulated to make the problem seem less severe. He highlights that “climate catastrophe” and “climate disaster” is on the horizon, with his use of hyperbolic language indicating that the UN are aware of the most recent and accurate climate change figures. Furthermore, his return to the notion of death – “failure is a death sentence” – at the end of the third paragraph reinforces how climate change will impact all of us and cannot be ignored. It will be particularly deadly for “Small Island Developing States”.

However, Guterres is adamant that “young people” are amongst the solutions to the climate emergency, describing how they lead the “climate action army”. Although this places an immense amount of pressure on the shoulders of youths, it also highlights the work done by activists including Greta Thunberg, who continues to attract global awareness towards her ‘school strikes for climate’. Guterres says that these young people are “unstoppable...larger...louder”, suggesting that the UN’s efforts are – rightly or wrongly – dwarfed by the action taken by young people to “safeguard our future”. His admission that “I stand with them” also shows how the UN is willing to support and demonstrate solidarity with youth climate activists, although to what extent this is meaningful is up for debate.

The UN evidently has a plan to tackle climate change, which Guterres outlines. He describes how “mitigation” – particularly for “G20 countries” which are richer and burn more fossil fuels – is essential, which arguably suggests that he is more concerned with the impacts on countries in the Western world than on their less developed counterparts. Nevertheless, developed countries “must lead the effort” due to their greater access to financial resources and legacies of colonialism which left ‘third world’ countries impoverished and slower to industrialise. This implies that the UN is realistic and takes a historical approach when it comes to climate change, although there belief that “emerging economies, too, must go the extra mile” seems like an empty statement without details of financial support.

The UN also puts lots of pressure and emphasis on its conferences – like COP26 in Glasgow – for major climate breakthroughs and discussions to occur. Whilst Guterres aims to rally countries and encourage “maximum ambition” from them in order for “success” to be achieved, his previous statements and tone implies that this has not been enough in the past. Indeed, phrases such as “we face a moment of truth” and “condemn the world to a calamitous 2.7 degree increase” convey climate doomism, which may have the opposite effect upon countries who are reluctant to “reduce global emissions by 45 per cent” as it is.

In closing, Guterres’ dramatic language and use of statistics shows how much of a priority climate change is for the UN. But his unsubstantiated statement that “climate action tops the list of people’s concerns, across countries, age and gender” ignores how socio-economic factors intersect with the climate crisis (e.g., farmers losing their income or food sources due to flooding or droughts). Therefore, whilst the UN enjoys setting targets for states, it is somewhat reductionist and doomist towards the future it is aiming to protect.