

The UN in Crisis?

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It is fashionable to suggest that the United Nations is in crisis. But the UN has been in almost perpetual crisis since its creation – the Cold war erupted almost immediately afterwards. And crisis – and its resolution – are the UN's *raison d'être*. There is no doubt, though, that its situation has become more serious in the 1990s, for a variety of reasons. Its chronic financial insolvency has reached a new nadir. Some dramatic failures in peacekeeping have overshadowed successes. It has been the subject of constant public criticism, particularly in the USA, and has lacked support from key member states. Is it, however, terminally ill?

The UN is beset by a series of paradoxes. The first is that it staggers from one crisis to the next at a time when the demand and the need for an effective international organisation are daily becoming greater. Globalisation and the shrinking world, brought about by the development of technology and communications, have unleashed forces that undermine the already declining ability of governments to control their own territories and policies. Meanwhile the power wielded by the largest transnational corporations, some of which are larger than many UN member states, increases all the time. Large corporations go into crisis – and out of business – when demand for their products falls. The UN is in exactly the reverse position.

The second paradox is that while globalisation increases apace and the world's problems, such as international crime, drug trafficking, terrorism, pollution, and the threat of global warming and climate change, transcend state frontiers, the concept of sovereignty is still very much alive and jealously guarded, although increasingly irrelevant.

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Secretary-General Kofi Annan's suggestion to the General Assembly last year that UN humanitarian intervention could be justified in certain cases met with a negative reaction from some developing countries, who interpreted it as a cloak for American or Western neo-colonialism. The developed countries are no more enthusiastic to relinquish sovereignty. Senator Jesse Helms gave a warning – or threat? – to the Security Council: 'a UN that seeks to impose its presumed authority on the American people, without their consent, begs for confrontation... and eventual American withdrawal.' Sir Brian Urquhart commented recently that 'he did not say whether this doctrine should apply to other sovereign countries – Iraq or Serbia, for example'.

In these circumstances, prospects for a strong and effective UN, as opposed to the present institutional arrangements – which may be called on if convenient, and which are unpredictable and slow to act – do not seem hopeful in the foreseeable future.

How has the Crisis Manifested Itself?

The crisis has many inter-related aspects and elements but I will deal with only a few: political, economic and social, financial, organisational structures and reform.

Political

The days of clamour for a New International Economic Order and of the North-South dialogue that marked the 1960s and 70s are over. But tensions between developed and developing countries are as strong, if not stronger, than ever, and the gap between them is increasing, especially in the case of the poorest countries, exacerbated by the differential effects of globalisation and the spread of the market economy. Yet the UN itself seems to be a less effective channel for addressing the concerns of developing countries, and a less effective forum for debating them than

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before, for example in the heyday of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) – another paradox!

The political weakness of the UN has also been demonstrated in a series of peacekeeping setbacks. Post-Cold War euphoria led to a great explosion of peacekeeping operations in the early 90s, but soon evaporated in a series of debacles, notably in Angola, Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia. The UN (in the narrow sense of its own secretariat) became an all too easy scapegoat and whipping boy for the media and anti-UN campaigners, and is blamed by member states for shortcomings often of their own making. Successes in peacekeeping, such as Namibia, Mozambique, Central America and (relatively) Cambodia are often forgotten, while member States' responsibility for failures, such as lack of political will, as tragically in Rwanda, and their reluctance and delay in providing the necessary money, equipment and personnel, are overlooked.

The Security Council itself is not geared to strong and decisive action, being essentially a body of compromise, reconciling different political interests. As a result, some of its resolutions are Delphic in their obscurity and the mandates and resources it authorises for complex operations are inadequate for the task in hand. UNAVEM II, in Angola, in 1991 – 3, is a tragic case in point.

Given the many condemnatory resolutions passed by the Council but unsupported by decisive action it is understandable that unscrupulous warlords may come to regard it as a toothless tiger. I am convinced that Jonas Savimbi, fighting in the Angolan bush in late 1993 in defiance of the Council's demands that he accept the results of the elections, was well aware of the simultaneous inefficacy of UN actions against Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic in Bosnia. A dangerous 'copy cat' syndrome of 'cocking a snook' with impunity at the UN has gained momentum.

Sanctions, when imposed, are often too little, too late, and ineffectively implemented. When they do bite, sanctions can be a blunt instrument,

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hitting the wrong target. A notably encouraging development, however, is the recent hard-hitting Fowler report and concomitant action to give teeth to the Council's mandated sanctions against UNITA in Angola.

Other problems stem from different responses by the Security Council, leading to accusations of double standards – for example, the discrepancy between the resources accorded to Namibia, Cambodia and Bosnia and those assigned to Angola in 1991. Many thousands of troops were sent to Kuwait, but only hundreds elsewhere. Today we see similar differences of scale between Kosovo and East Timor. As I watched the East Timor tragedy evolve it seemed to me at first to be horrifyingly like 'Angola all over again' – the operation successful but the patient dies. Fortunately, in the case of East Timor, the patient was rushed into intensive care at the last moment.

Economic and Social

The eye-catching features of the UN are its political aspects and particularly its peacekeeping work. But in concentrating on these, it is often forgotten that the Preamble to the UN's Charter includes among its main purposes 'to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom'. The UN has had many quiet successes in the economic and social field; nevertheless, it does not seem to play the same leadership role as in its early days. Where are the current eminent and visionary UN thinkers to match Myrdal, Tinbergen, Lewis, Prebisch and Singer? The post of Director General for Development and International Co-operation, first proposed in the Capacity Study (the 'Jackson Report') in 1969 and tardily (and poorly) implemented in 1975, was abolished in 1992, while Brian Urquhart and Erskine Childers' proposal for a Deputy Secretary-General for International Economic Co-operation and Sustainable Development in their 1994 book¹ was never implemented.

In the absence of strong economic and social leadership in the UN, major issues of economic and indirectly, social, policy have increasingly passed to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These, with their

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weighted voting, are unrepresentative, and as Specialised Agencies are not on the same level as the UN proper. The World Trade Organization has also become a powerful player.

Meanwhile, there has been a vertiginous decline in development aid from the developed to the developing world and this has seriously affected the UN Development Programme. The 1969 Pearson Commission recommendation that developed countries should allocate 0.7% of their GNP for development assistance has still been achieved by only a few countries. In some, including the UK during the Thatcher years, the percentage has declined. In the UK it is rising to 0.33% as a result of the recent Comprehensive Spending Review under the present government, but still has a long way to go. In 1999 the UN budget for peacekeeping increased by over 300% while that for development fell by almost 50%, a matter not only of serious economic concern for many developing countries, but also a political issue.

Humanitarian and disaster relief is also escalating exponentially; governments, under public pressure, are much more willing to contribute to these than to development aid. Another paradox arises here. Humanitarian relief can only be a palliative, while development assistance attempts to address the basic causes of conflict and contribute to long-term stability. It would be simplistic to argue that economic and social factors are the *main* cause of all conflicts but they almost always play a large role: poverty; availability of land, as in El Salvador; access to resources, as in Angola and Sierra Leone; and skewed distribution of wealth.

The UN's over-arching aim, to maintain international peace and security, was originally rather narrowly interpreted. But it is now increasingly appreciated that peace and security mean much more than the absence of war and a new concept is emerging of security, which can no longer be measured merely in terms of military expenditure or defence budgets. There cannot be social or political stability where there is discrimination, widespread poverty, or vast differences in income and economic

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opportunities. Security, in this broader sense, is also adversely affected by the social effects of programmes of structural adjustment and economic stabilisation, and in the transition from a centrally planned to a market economy, as evidenced in the former Soviet Union. A corollary to all this is that sustainable peace cannot be achieved by peacekeeping operations alone, no matter how successful these may be.

Hence we have the current emphasis on post-conflict peace building and conflict prevention through preventive diplomacy. The two are intimately linked but the simpler umbrella term 'peace-building' cannot be used because of political sensitivities about perceived intervention – the ogre of national sovereignty again. Post-conflict peace building is itself a misnomer, since peace-building must often start before conflict has totally died down.

Post-conflict peace building requires concurrent and integrated action on many fronts at once, involving a plethora of actors. These include reconstruction, restoring productive processes, vocational training and job creation for ex-combatants to re-integrate them in society. Good governance should be developed through democratic processes and institutions, sound judicial systems with honest and effective administration, the protection of human rights, and fair economic and social development. Investment in education, especially for women, together with health and social services, is vital.

The present organisational structures and *modus operandi* of the UN system are not geared to this integrated approach. For example, in New York the inter-related activities of peacekeeping and post-conflict peace building are divided between two departments. The UN system of Specialised Agencies and organisations is built up largely on sectoral lines, so that the response to increasing inter-relationship between problems, instead of closer articulation and inter-action, takes the form of everyone trying to get on the band-wagon, expanding their mandates, and vying for the lead role. The result is even more duplication and inter-Agency rivalry

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than before – another paradox: emergence of the need for more integrated action is met by increased fragmentation.

The traditional solution to such situations in the UN system – fatal in my view – is to set up still more co-ordinating machinery leading to layers of ‘co-ordinators of co-ordinators’. Instead, more modest and pragmatic solutions are needed and are eminently feasible, provided common sense and a genuine commitment to co-operation prevail.

Financial

As it confronts ever-increasing demands, the UN flounders in constant financial crisis. For many years, zero growth has been imposed on its regular budget. Peacekeeping assessments have also been cut to the bone, with much reliance on ‘mixed financing’ as in Kosovo and East Timor. Crippling arrears in paying even agreed assessments compound the problem of inadequate budgets with a chronic cash flow crisis.

The most desperate point was reached in 1995, when the US paid only 48% of its regular budget dues and 40% of its peacekeeping assessment. The situation at the end of 1999 was marginally better. The US has paid in more but subject to conditions, and overall unpaid assessments on both the regular and peace-keeping budgets are still considerable with the US still the main debtor. Yet we are not talking of astronomical sums. The total regular core budget of the UN is \$1,250 million per annum (covering the New York, Geneva, Vienna, and Nairobi offices and the Regional Commissions). In comparison, this is about 4% of New York City’s annual budget, and \$1 billion less than that of Tokyo’s fire department.

Mixed financing makes already complex operations even more difficult to manage, especially when – as again in Kosovo and East Timor - arrears also mount up over voluntary donations. As Kofi Annan comments in his Millennium Report: ‘Our resources are simply not commensurate with our global tasks’. How can anyone manage effectively, plan ahead and be visionary if one doesn’t know how the next day’s bills are to be met?

Organisational Structures and Reform

It is abundantly clear that the UN's present organisational structures are inadequate for its task. However, the prospects for the far-reaching reforms required are bleak. What needs to be done is evident and logical, and has been rehearsed in a multiplicity of reform proposals from the Capacity Study in the 1960s and the Group of 18 proposals of the 1980s to *Renewing the United Nations System*¹ and many others beside. All these bear a striking resemblance to one another; why then, have these ideas not been implemented?

A basic problem is that the UN is not a logical organisation. Member states, even like-minded ones who constantly clamour for reform, find it difficult to agree – especially when their own interests are involved. There are myriad examples. Our recommendations in 1987, in implementing the Group of 18 report, for a small unit to collect information on impending crises as an early warning tool for the Secretary General, led to cries in Washington that we were setting up a KGB, and in Moscow that we were creating a CIA! In that particular reform process the United States got everything it wanted – staff reductions, a new, more controlled budgetary process, and a zero growth budget, but still did not pay up.

Even when member states do agree on a desirable course of action, they often cannot agree on the modalities, as with the revision of the budgetary assessments system and reform of the Security Council. Again, member states criticise slow deployment of peace-keeping missions, due to the cumbersome procedures involved in soliciting troops and police from individual countries, but most refuse to allow the UN to have its own rapid reaction force, even if staffed by volunteers. In these circumstances progress on effective reform is hard to achieve. More seriously, when one reform process disappoints, another is instituted. These constant upheavals and staff reductions – with the threat of more to come – have devastated staff morale, and undermined efficiency, defeating the object of the

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exercise.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Yet the story is not all gloom and doom. There has been some real progress towards making the world a better place. War Crimes Tribunals on former Yugoslavia and Rwanda are in place, the International Criminal Court has at least been created, if not yet fully operational. Lessons *have* been learned from mistakes in past peacekeeping. The courage of men and women still prepared to risk their lives in bringing peace to conflict-riven areas of the world must be saluted. There has been an alarming rise in their death toll: aid workers are now more at risk than military peacekeepers. Had Childers and Urquhart's proposal for an Humanitarian Emergency Police ('White Helmets') to protect aid workers, their transport, and their supplies, been adopted, many lives would have been saved and much material wastage avoided.

Nevertheless, it is quite evident that progress, such as it is, is far too slow. The only long-term hope for humankind and the world is a strong and adequately funded United Nations, with the resources and the authority to carry out the tasks assigned to it. At the moment, the radical change needed to bring this about is a pipe dream, in a world in which one super-power calls the shots, and given the continuing fixation with sovereignty in most member states.

The UN is not terminally ill. It is unlikely to die or be subjected to euthanasia, but that could mean that an even worse sickness may be in store. Prolonged crisis and weakness due to continued under-funding and the lack of political will to strengthen the organisation could lead to continuing accusations of ineffectiveness, which then become a self-fulfilling prophecy. How can a better intermediate resolution of the crisis be found?

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It is impossible to continue to believe in across-the-board reforms, as proposed in the Capacity Study or *Renewing the United Nations System*, no matter how logical. Key ideas, so often endorsed but not acted upon, must be kept alive in a different way, and applied on an *ad hoc* basis as circumstances permit. The way forward, in my view, is through significant individual changes that will have a multiplier effect. Major steps, such as drastic changes in the method of selecting the Secretary-General and Heads of Agencies, instead of the political horse-trading that goes on now, combined with a single, longer term in post for these top officials, and a consolidated budget for the UN system, would at one fell swoop solve many problems of co-ordination.

Above all, intense public and media pressure must be stimulated to bring about the required change – ‘We the Peoples of the United Nations...’ must become a reality. This will be very difficult; because of prevailing indifference and ignorance. Action for UN Renewal, United Nations Associations, and similar non-governmental organisations have a key role to play but the net must be cast much wider and the younger generation must be engaged.

The Internet has recently been used successfully to mobilise widespread demonstrations *against* organisations such as the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund. Could it not be massively incorporated into a universal campaign *for* the renewal of the UN? This idea would surely appeal to Erskine Childers’ rebellious Irish spirit and his genius for imaginative communication. The best way we can commemorate that spirit and genius is by keeping his ideas alive in such ways.

Reference

1. Childers E, Urquhart B. *Renewing the United Nations System*. Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 1994.

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Addendum

The four years since I gave this lecture have, sadly, confirmed my thesis that the United Nations seems doomed to exist in a perpetual state of crisis. This is perhaps inevitable in a world in which multilateralism and unilateralism remain in conflict and national sovereignty, however limited in real terms in a vertiginously shrinking world, continues to dominate so many international and national politics.

The paradoxes and inter-related elements of the crisis that I identified in 2000 are still evident, especially in the political and economic and social fields. The backlog in financial contributions to the United Nations has eased somewhat, but the budget is pathetically inadequate for an international organisation called upon to resolve huge and multifarious global challenges that threaten the survival of humanity. There have been new attempts at structural reform. The Brahimi report of 2000 produced useful recommendations for making the vital area of peacekeeping more effective, a number of which have been implemented. In September 2004, a new high-level group with broader remit is expected to make recommendations designed to adapt the structures and functioning of the organisation to the fresh and emerging challenges of the 21st century. It will be interesting to see whether they can come up with viable ideas for the strengthening and expansion of the Security Council and even more interesting to observe member states' reactions to their proposals.

A new and alarming paradox has been thrown up by the upsurge in terrorism and the cataclysmic attack of 11 September 2001. Events so clearly demonstrating the global nature of the threat and the consequent need to combat it multilaterally through the United Nations have, instead, led to divisions in the Security Council and the increase of unilateralism. In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq the UN came to be considered by the United States as at best irrelevant and at worse an obstacle to the attainment

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of its policies.

Yet at the end of 2000, when the UN appeared to be at its nadir, public interest in the organisation, to the importance of which I gave special emphasis at the end of my lecture, and public pressure for its involvement, grew enormously, at least in this country. In pubs and at dinner tables people who had never paid much attention to the Security Council, much less known how it functioned, could be heard clamouring for a second resolution.

As has invariably happened in the past, when the post-conflict problems in Iraq became intractable the UN was called in, tardily, and with an inadequate mandate and resources. It became a target, and the tragic culmination of this botched process of international negotiation was the brutal murder of Sergio Vieira de Mello, and other friends and colleagues devoted to the cause of peace, in August 2003. The need for peace building after conflict, and for the involvement of the whole UN system in this highly complex and multidisciplinary activity, has never been more graphically shown the Iraq.

No weapons of mass destruction were found there but the possibility of their falling into the hands of a nihilistic terrorist whose single, fanatical aim is to overturn the existing order, overhangs humanity with the threat of ultimate doom. Yet most of the major powers in the world seem intent on addressing the symptoms of the terrorist disease, rather than its roots in poverty, marginalisation and exclusion, the conditions that breed ready recruits for organisations led by fanatical terrorist leaders.

Any thinking person who seriously ponders the future of the world must conclude that the United Nations, with all its shortcomings - and there is no lack of vociferous critics who proclaim them daily, drowning out the voices of those who think otherwise - is even more indispensable in the twenty-first century. The overwhelming challenge is how to harness political and public pressure to make possible the necessary reforms and the proper use

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of the organisation as a bulwark for collective security rather a last reluctantly turned to when disaster looms. That will require revised definitions by member states of sovereignty, of where their true self-interest - and survival - lies. It will demand political leadership of the highest order. At this time of writing there are few encouraging signs of such radical change.

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