

Reforms of the United Nations, and role of UN in peace and international security

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Contents

1. Introduction
2. Current Global Security Threats
3. Wars, Weapons and Military Spending
4. Conflict and Environment
5. Peacekeeping Operations
6. Essential UN Reforms
 - a) Security Council
 - b) Demilitarisation
 - c) Peace Building
 - d) Responsibility to Protect – Humanitarian Intervention
 - e) Prevention of Warfare
 - f) Culture of Peace
 - g) Multilateral Diplomacy
7. Conclusion

Introduction

Thanks to the University of Leeds UNA and Avnish for inviting me to speak today. You are fortunate to live in Leeds which is one of those cities that has always worked in radical ways around peace and disarmament. I have had the privilege of visiting your wonderful city on a few occasions attending and addressing conferences.

Today, we are going to deliberate on the role of the UN in international peace and security and the reforms of the UN. How can we have a more effective UN which can run global security and its peacekeeping operations in a more efficient way? How can it also work towards a more peaceful world? After all UN was created

“...to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war which in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind.” (Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations)

One wonders why long running conflicts are not resolved in different parts of the world—Africa, Europe and Middle –East. The hurdles in peacekeeping lie in the slow progress made by Security Council. The decisions by the Security Council are blocked by veto power countries. The progress in Darfur is blocked by China as Sudan is one of its major suppliers of oil and China wants to protect its financial interests. All efforts to give independence to Kosovo are vetoed by Russia as Serbia is a major business and strategic partner. USA, while pretending to find solution to middle-East crisis, have blocked progress in the Israeli-Palestine issue, because of strong Jewish lobby in America. Moreover, it is arming Israel with the latest high tech weapons, which in turn has increased violence and bloodshed in the area. It is shame and tragic that governments always find ways to delay effective international action while pursuing their narrow agenda.

We will discuss current global security threats, rise of military spending, wars and peace keeping operations. In conclusion we will explore how United Nation can be strengthened to effectively deal with increasing international peace and security challenges.

Current Global Security Threats

Global security can be broadly defined in three categories – global, human and collective. Global security focuses on the security of territory and governments. Human security is concerned with the preservation of life and its safety in the changing world. The concept of collective security forms the bedrock of the United Nations charter and has served the international community for several decades.

Security doesn't come from multiplying weapons. History has already proven this too many times. Security comes from remedying injustice, easing shortages and creating opportunities. We need the creation of a multi-polar world of balance without imperialistic hegemony.

At present the world security is threatened by:

- The deteriorating situation in Iraq and Afghanistan
- Current tensions with nuclear proliferation issues with Iran and North Korea
- Human rights abuses in Darfur, Burma and other places
- Averting the looming climate change crisis.
- Global militarisation

Wars, Weapons and Military Spending

There are – civil wars like in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), wars between states as Iran-Iraq, tribal wars like in Rwanda, environmental wars like in Darfur and the Middle East, and international wars for resources and combating terrorism as in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Wars can be started by any questionable excuses like the Bush administration's figures, most notoriously about non-existent Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, (which post-invasion now accounts for 1.5-2 million deaths).

At other times, for creating fear among different parts of world for maintaining the superpower status, or gaining a foothold on resources like the oil, diamonds and minerals? At present, the world consumes 84 billion barrels of oil per day. Most of it is consumed in the Western World and the main suppliers are in

the Middle East. The US and its allies have engaged in many wars for the continuous supply of oil like the recent war in Iraq.

The growing conflict in Kenya, Sri Lanka is of major concern. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto and the deteriorating situation in Pakistan is also likely to increase tensions among its neighbours especially India, as both countries possess nuclear weapons, the control and safety of which are of paramount importance for the fear of falling in wrong hands.

The stock of nuclear arsenal (around 27000 nuclear weapons possessed by nine countries) is a constant risk and cause of tension between countries as is evident in US and Iran stand off. So are conventional weapons (around 600 million hand guns and rifles in circulation today) leading to violence, unrest and wars?

Security Council should work on nuclear weapons convention as outlined in the 13 point plan of the 2000 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review conference; with the aim of securing general and complete disarmament.

Owing to rising violence and wars, the military spending continues to rise. In 2006, \$1.3 trillion is the amount spent by the military including the manufacturing of weapons and financing wars. The USA was responsible for 41% of that total. The Bush government has recently requested \$644 billion for the military spending in the fiscal year of 2008 for the war on Iraq and Afghanistan. India, China and countries in Middle East among others continue to increase their military budgets raising fear of war to be a strong possibility.

The increase in military spending shows the faith of US and its allies in depending on military solutions. While 3 billion US dollars are daily invested in weapons 60,000 people die of starvation. The continued sales of arms and other military hardware encourage violence, conflicts, genocide and mass killings around the world. Governments provide millions of dollars in military aid to dictatorships and oppressive regimes throughout the world, countries which have appalling levels of armed violence and Human Rights violations.

It is estimated that Africa alone loses an estimated \$18 billion per year due to wars, civil wars and insurgencies. Many companies thrive off conflict whether they are supplying military hardware to armed forces or running mercenary armies on behalf of combatant states.

Conflict and Environment

In future there will be conflicts which were not thought of before like energy security, scarcity of water, and food shortages. The conflict in Darfur is a prime example which has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and left millions homeless.

Armed conflict can be the cause of environmental degradation, for example in the Democratic Republic Congo; people are coerced into marginal ecological areas where overuse and mismanagement of land leads to soil erosion. The current issue of climate change has caused increasing floods or desertification that can lead to conflict over space and resources, perpetuating poverty and vulnerability. The problem of environmental refugees is becoming increasingly more relevant, and could lead to disputes over land and natural resources, overcrowding and environmental degradation.

Climate change and poverty eradication are interconnected issues and a holistic approach should be adopted to address these interdependent issues for better environmental management and for attaining sustainable development.

Peacekeeping Operations

Peacekeeping institution is not mentioned in the UN's original charter. Dag Hammarskjöld, UN secretary general seized the opportunity of the Suez Crisis created by Britain and France's invasion of Egypt in 1956 to persuade governments to create peacekeeping forces.

We will examine how the worsening world situation is being dealt by UN peacekeeping operations by spending billions of dollars. Do you know that at any given time there are 70 conflicts raging around the world? At the same time there are UN peacekeeping missions in 17 countries deploying 100,000 peacekeeping personnel from 119 countries. These are engaged in trying to keep peace on four continents. From Sri Lanka to Afghanistan, Sudan to Colombia ordinary civilians bear the brunt of violence. In war 90% of the casualties are women and children. Just imagine how many patients are dying in hospitals in Gaza and Baghdad due to lack of electricity and medicines owing to war. Even worse they can't even go to hospitals as they are in war zones with barriers or curfews. A decade of fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo is continuing to kill about 45,000 people each month.

A report by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), says that armed violence costs Guatemala more than \$ 2.4 billion a year in keeping public security and health care. It is the same scenario in other countries where water supplies, hospitals and bridges are destroyed by war and have to be rebuilt after the war is over.

In few countries like Kashmir, Cyprus, and Congo UN peacekeepers are keeping the peace for over 40 years. The conflicts started by grandfathers are being fought by their grandchildren. If only people were able to forget the past, let go of hatred, we would be living in a different world. As human beings our greatness lies in forgiveness.

Essential UN Reforms

In the backdrop of the above situation how a reformed and effective United Nations can play a pivotal role for seeking a safer passage into this century.

I am going to list some of the essential reforms the world body should incorporate:

1. Deal with the five permanent members and their excessive power.
2. Widen the membership of the Security Council to make it more representative.
3. Tackle the veto—which puts all major reforms under the control of the existing permanent members.
4. Change the way in which the SC orders military action in order to control the process.
5. Work for General Assembly regaining its powers and develop the 'responsibility to protect', a concept supported by the discussions at the UN General Assembly in September 2005.
6. Activate Article 26 of UN Charter for arms reduction. (Which I will discuss later in demilitarisation reforms).

Security Council

However I am going to deal with Security Council reforms first as it is relevant to our discussion today. It concerns the structure and the practice of Security Council as it is the primary actor regarding international peace and security. Indeed, criticism of the Council's lack of representativeness and transparency has not diminished in recent years, despite a shift towards more openness. On the contrary, as the Council has become ever more active, criticism has increased correspondingly.

One of the reforms should be that Security Council should be enlarged 30 members of which 20 should be 2 year short-term members chosen by their regions. The 10 existing 2-year states have shown their dedication and judgement, often bravely declining to support contentious proposals. They are the democratic face of the Security Council, mostly elected by their own regional organizations.

The role of UN should be strengthened by a standby, better equipped, peacekeeping force. At present, in a crisis situation, the Secretary General has to ring around for deploying peacekeepers when diplomacy has failed and a country is imminently sliding into a crisis.

UN reforms should include a fair representation and better geopolitical mix. Security Council should include big and emerging countries like India, Brazil, Germany and Japan as permanent members.

The reform of the Security Council is to make it a more efficient, transparent, legitimate, representative forum with better work methods.

Demilitarisation

Activate Article 26 of the UN Charter, which calls for promoting the establishment and maintenance of international peace and security with the least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources. To solve today's complex problems we need to demilitarise the global economy by reducing military budgets and shifting resources toward human security programs? Also to raise awareness, campaign for better gun laws, stop the proliferation and misuse of small arms and weapons of mass destruction. The sad fact is that in wars in Africa and Asia, child soldiers are recruited who use these arms for fighting wars. It is estimated that some 250,000 serve as child soldiers.

The UN should impose sanctions in African and Asian countries including Somalia, Uganda, Sudan and Sri Lanka to ban children fighting in armed conflicts.

Peace Building

The UN budget for peacekeeping should be increased to a realistic level for fulfilling its heavy commitments. At present its annual yearly budget is \$ 2.3 billion which is smaller than the budget of the Tokyo fire department.

UN peacekeepers are deployed in some of the world's most hostile and complex environments and are the best value per person for peacekeeping in any part of the world. This is an observation made by none other than the US department of defence and not the UN audit office. Even then the irony is, at present time, the United States is behind its payment to the tune of \$1.5 billion to the UN and its agencies, thus undermining the promotion of peace in war torn regions.

One good initiative which came from the summit of world leaders in 2005 was the creation of Peace Building Commission (PBC). It is intended to bridge the gap in the coordination of peace building activities in countries just emerging from violent conflict.

The real significance of PBC is in the fact that most conflicts reoccur within 5 years of its starting and it can help to stop it.

Responsibility to Protect - Humanitarian Intervention

Another breakthrough for peace keeping came from UN's world leader's summit in 2005. It was the adoption of the concept of 'Responsibility to Protect'. It established the principle that sovereignty of a

country is not sacrosanct and that the Security Council should be prepared to act when countries either commit or fail to prevent genocide or crimes against humanity on their territories.

It aims to provide a legal and ethical basis for "humanitarian intervention" : the intervention by external actors (preferably the international community through the UN) in a state that is unwilling or unable to fight genocide, massive killings and other massive human rights violations being inflicted on its citizens. It should only be used as a last resort and the concept should be widened to include method of conflict resolution other than the use of force.

Extremism and terrorism can not be tackled by military means but by dialogue and improving political, social and economic conditions and by promoting culture of peace and education. In this the role of the media is important to prevent the conflict and misinformation.

For Peace to prevail depends on whether we can press for implementation of nuclear and conventional arms agreements. We should also expose hypocrisy of continuing arms trade by major countries. We should change public opinion and take action toward disarming the world which will strengthen peacekeeping operations.

Prevention of Warfare

UN and civil society should promote laws which prohibit wars like:

- The general treaty for the Renunciation of War (Kellog-Briand Pact)
- The Nuremberg charter and principals
- The charter of the United Nations

The main legal principals included in the UN charter are that:

- International disputes must be settle by peaceful means,
- Member States must never threaten or use force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any of a state.
- The only legal use of armed force occurs when a state has been attacked and must defend itself and/or if the Security Council acts to restore international peace and security.

Culture of Peace

It's incredible that even in the 21st century, the institution of war is well and alive.

One of the solutions to stop wars could be to promote culture of non-violence and non-killing for replacing the gun culture. It will ensure human survival. For achieving this worldwide campaign for non-violence training is essential. Non-violence is an antidote to a culture of killing that pervades the Earth. The task is challenging but for peace to prevail we have to reverse the trend of killing through hating violence, war, and mass psychological transformation for creating harmony, peace and love.

One such example is the ammunitions destroyed in Colombia. As part of the peace process, 18,000 weapons and 2.7 million pieces of ammunition where melted into 25 tons of metal in the city of Sogamoso recently. The metal was transformed into sculptures in memory of victims of paramilitary activities. The guns were handed in through the demobilization process of the paramilitary group United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). Most of these guns had been used in the conflicts of El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala before being sold to Colombian guerrillas.

One needs to promote mediation support team with full time advisors available at short notice. After the conflicts, a truth and reconciliation process should be taken up with people cooperating for lasting peace.

Multilateral Diplomacy

Multilateral diplomacy at international level is the best way forward in the world. Nations should deal with global problems first, instead of putting their own agenda which is a recipe for disaster. Europe is a prime example that shows the world that political solutions of the wider world are possible without endangering the agenda of the nation states. This is a quantum leap in solving world problems, keeping away the unnecessary violence and wars which are creating untold suffering in the world.

There is book called 'The 33 strategies of war' by Robert Greene. It describes the horrific and brutal way wars are fought and won. The lesson from that book I learnt is that Generals and great warriors demonstrate prudence, agility, calm and keen understanding of conducting their armies in the battlefield, so that they can defeat their enemies. Similarly we need to organise ourselves on a massive scale and apply our resourcefulness, acumen, patience, dialogue, negotiation and diplomacy to achieve peace.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are some historic peace agreements, treaties and documents which give encouragement that if pursued relentlessly, peace can be achieved. Some of these are:

- Ottawa Convention on Landmines which bans all anti-personnel landmines
- Nuclear non-proliferation treaty which has been measured to have been successful by the fact that no other nuclear bomb has been exploded after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings.
- The Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland which helped to set up the peace process because of which we have tremendous economic growth today.
- Regan—Gorbachev agreement for reduction of nuclear arsenal.

The only way lasting peace can prevail is for people to let go of their differences and hatred and build a future for living in peace and harmony.

You are the future leaders of the world and you can develop a 'can do' attitude and have ideas, and strategies which you can take from this meeting and start putting in to practice today. As Margaret Mead said,

'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world, indeed it is the only thing that ever has.'

One concrete step I would like for you to take is to write a letter to Prime Minister Gordon Brown at 10-Downing Street to say,

- Being a permanent member of United Nations Security Council the UK should work for a more effective and strengthened UN for ending wars, violence and the maintenance of international peace and security.
- We welcome the Prime Minister's statement which he made in his speech in New Delhi in January 23, 2008 about UK being willing to take the initiative and eliminate Britain's nuclear weapons. Thanks for putting the issue of nuclear disarmament on the global agenda. The UK should set an example by destroying Britain's nuclear arsenal, pursuing multilateral negotiations for disarmament and secure a world free from nuclear weapons.
- For achieving the Millennium Development Goals, poverty reduction and fighting climate change, UK should build a special relationship with the United Nations instead of one with the USA which at times undermines path of global justice and the rule of law.

If the Prime Minister gets a large number of letters he is bound to take notice, and act.

We have covered a lot of ground today from the role of the UN in international peace and security to reforms of the UN. Let me conclude by saying the United Nations is the most universal world body. The priority in 2008 would be for the United Nations and its agencies to live up to their original mandate, which was to bring all nations of the world together to work for peace and development, based on the principles of justice, human dignity and the well-being of all people.

Thank you for listening.

The full version of this speech can be downloaded from:

- VM Centre for Peace www.vmpeace.org
- Action for UN Renewal www.action-for-un-renewal.org

Vijay Mehta is an author and global activist for peace, development, human rights and the environment. Some of his notable books are The Fortune Forum Summit: For a Sustainable Future, Arms No More, and The United Nations and Its Future in the 21st Century. He is president of VM Centre for Peace (www.vmpeace.org), co-founder of Fortune Forum Charity, acting chair of Action for UN Renewal, and co-chair of World Disarmament Campaign.

He along with his daughter Renu Mehta founder of Fortune Forum(www.fortuneforum.org) held two summits in London in 2006 and 2007. The summit's attracted a worldwide audience of 1.3 billion people (one fifth of humanity) including print and media coverage. The keynote speakers for the first and second summit were Bill Clinton, former US President and Al Gore, former US vice-President, and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize 2007.

Vijay Mehta has appeared in various TV programmes including BBC World , Aftak-24 hour Indian news channel, Iranian national TV, and Think Peace documentary, Canada, among others. The Independent, Observer and Guardian newspapers, among other journals have written about him. His work and public speaking engagements are dedicated to the service of humanity and our planet. He is at present writing a book on climate change jointly with, Renu Mehta