

Come UNdone

The need to empower the United Nations

By Mohammed Qayyum

By the time you read this, the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) would have already packed up and left Somalia, in the words of the New Yorker, a "Horn of Hell" (New Yorker: Mar. 20, 1995). And as you read this, the UN will still be hand-tied in Bosnia. Suffice it to say, the optimism occasioned by the crumbling of the Berlin Wall has all but evaporated; the UN has lost all of its great promise. This is a moment of failure, a moment of despair for the World Community. But this is also a chance for the World to learn from how all this came to be, to learn how all the hope turned to dust. Here follows the tragedy of the New World Order.

HOPE

Marking the end of the Cold War, the Berlin Wall crumbled in November, 1989. The world hoped that the end of the Cold War would lead to something momentous and great. James Baker felt the moment and expressed its promise as such: the world is entering an "era full of promise"; this moment is going to be "one of those rare transforming moments in history" (Chomsky: 7). George Bush saw the moment as heralding the arrival of "a new world order - where diverse nations are drawn together in common cause, to achieve the universal aspirations of mankind: peace and security, freedom and the rule of law" (Ibid). The chief tool for this change, it was envisioned, would be the United Nations Organization.

ATTEMPT

The UN had a plan for this momentous change. In 1992, the Secretary General of the UN, Boutros Boutros Ghali voiced the need for "reforming the United Nations" in orders to empower it (Foreign Affairs: Winter 1992/93). The Secretary General Mohammed Qayyum is a sophomore majoring in economics and political science at Columbia College.

in an article in the said journal proposed that the UN "expand, adapt and reinventorize (its) work to the lofty goals of its charter" (ibid.). Ghali also intended for the UN to take on the job of extended peacekeeping and to formally assume the task of protecting and delivering humanitarian aid. To achieve these ambitious goals, Mr. Ghali, proposed that in order to become more operational in the field, the UN should take action "on three fronts: finance, personnel, and equipment." (ibid). His propositions were:

- 1) On matters of finance a working capital fund was needed; existing procedures needed to be revised too. A need for some sort of method to ensure that countries with substantial arrears pay up their bills was indicated.
- 2) For personnel, Mr. Ghali envisioned a standing UN army made up of volunteers, to be used for the purpose of peacekeeping. His argument was that having a standing army would make the efficient deployment of forces much easier and more cost effective.
- 3) The provision of field equipment formed the greatest bottleneck in UN deployments. Mr. Ghali asked the member countries to contribute towards a UN equipment reserves in various regions of the world.

All of the above were reasonable and essential changes, and the UN really did require them. It was obvious that the UN did not lack in vision or ambition. It went forth with great fervor, but soon ran into trouble.

TROUBLE, DISILLUSIONMENT & DISASTER

Initially the UN met with significant amounts of success (the UN effort in Cambodia UNTAC was one case of great success, the Gulf War another), but with the discipline of the Cold War gone, certain heterogenous countries whose boundaries were artificially demarcated lost the only thing that had held them together. The world subsequently broke out with a rash of ethnic conflicts. An overburdened Security Council found itself unable to cope with the growing demands placed by these conflicts. Member countries were unwilling to commit to UN efforts, and there was squabbling. The honeymoon was over, and as the problems of Bosnia, Somalia, and Rwanda screamed out for attention, the UN started losing its promise of authority and credibility.

By late 1993 to the early 1994, when Lori Damrosch spoke of "enforcing restraint" on a World spinning out of control (Enforcing restraint: 1994) it was in a guarded, apprehensive tone. Obviously, the optimism was wearing thin.

By pursuing extended peacekeeping it



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turned out that the UN had overextended itself. When Somalia blew up in the UN's face, it seemed that the best the UN could do in terms of peacekeeping was to mitigate conflicts, to stop them from escalating. The promise of before was not fulfilled and the disillusionment was great.

As a response to the great disappointment, people even took to looking back nostalgically at the simplicity and relative peace of the Cold War era. The dismay grew with each UN failure, and the recent trend of opposing all things new and in any way linked to the UN surfaced. Alan Tonelson recently asked the US to "Jetison the (Human Rights) Policy." An obituary was seemingly written for all things new, and by extension, people even began to consider the UN a defunct institution. Moreover, people also started finding faults with instances of UN success: Thomas Weiss, in *The United Nations & Changing World Politics*, stated that the UN success in Cambodia, initially termed the greatest success story in UN history, was in spite of UNTAC not because of it (76).

WHY DID THE UN FAIL ?

Failure can be attributed to the member states, and in particular the US for not being totally committed to the cause of the UN. The US continues to view the UN as a tool to its own ends: This has been never more evident than in the statement recently made by Tony Lake, the US National Security Advisor: "If peacekeeping operations ever con-

flicted with our ability to carry out those operations, we would pull out of the peace operations to serve our primary military purposes. But we will, as the President has said many times, seek collective rather than unilateral solutions to regional and intrastate conflicts that don't touch our core national interests. And we'll choose between unilateral and collective approaches between the UN or other coalitions depending on what works best and what best serves American interests." (Lake). Such statements and attitudes undermine the ability of the UN to project itself as a legitimate and neutral representative of all nations of the world.

The UN also failed because it simply promised too much, for in its excitement and ambition, it promised the unachievable. Expectations were too high, so in many instances it really did not "fail," rather too much was expected of it. Ambitions were particularly unrealistic with regards to "extended peacekeeping." When they touched down in foreign countries, the peacekeepers found out that in places of ethnic conflict and racial violence, it was really very difficult to maintain neutrality and to stay out of the conflict themselves. The peacekeepers were frequently sucked into the conflict, with Somalia being the most notable case. The killing of 14 Pakistani peacekeepers at the hands of the militia of Gen. Farah Aidid in Somalia led to an UN effort to 'neutralize' the General. This ultimately destroyed all semblance of neutrality the UN had ever had in the matter of peacemaking, and so when the

warring parties of Somalia came together to discuss peace, the UN had to leave a still unstable, violent country behind in order for talks to proceed.

The greatest mistake made in attempting extended peacekeeping was that the UN really did not organize itself along efficient lines. When the UN forces were deployed in a state of unreadiness, all logistical hell broke loose. Somalia presents an excellent case-study—it turned out to be the most expensive project in UN history. The final bill came to more than two billion dollars (Finnegan: 68), [and the mission was a failure!]. In an administrative sense, the effort turned out to "be notoriously corrupt (UN contracts and equipment, including vehicles, were simply for sale), and astoundingly wasteful—the UN compound in Magadishu was built at a cost of more than 50 million dollars, and then in February 1995, was abandoned to looters" (Ibid). This horrific instance of administration increased the reluctance of UN members to foot the bill for peacekeeping.

Even when the UN failed in its peacekeeping initiatives, those failures pale in comparison to its peacemaking efforts. Given that the UN did not ever really manage to coerce warring parties to stop, in conflicts, it can be said that the failure was more in the realm of peacemaking than in that of peacekeeping. Once peacemaking failed, peacekeeping, which is only supposed to be a palliative, followed. Effective peacemaking would have been something along the lines of 'pulling the plug' on warring parties, by getting their international backers to back out. (Khmer Rouge did not do violence to the UN and destabilize Cambodia because China its international supporter had cut back on its support after the Paris Accord of 1989-90.) But the UN failed to do this, as it could not coerce the international backers of parties in conflicts to back out (say, Serbia in the Bosnia case). It is therefore unsurprising when dominant parties, assured of support and supply of weapons, come to the peace-table with little or no reason to talk peace.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE COURSE OF ACTION

The UN has failed. Nonetheless, a future without the UN would indeed be a bleak future. So it is obvious that the UN should remain intact—granted numerous changes are



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imperative. Half-hearted attempts will not work. Suggestions are many, but the practicality of each is uncertain.

How far will member countries go along? The full commitment of member states is indeed needed. Countries periodically participating for their own selfish reasons will not sustain a credible UN. Therefore, firm commitment from members is key. If world peace is indeed desired, then all the nations of the world, and the US particularly, need to be seriously committed to a world organization. The US need not look for the UN as a tool and use it as such whenever US interests abroad are threatened, rather it needs to fully back the UN, no matter what the cost. Taking a few casualties abroad must not occasion a complete withdrawal (See the case of Somalia where a loss of 30 men in the search for Farah Aidid led to the disintegration of US resolve—the Vietnam syndrome. Some sort of international discipline is required (the US with its significant clout can provide that.) Suppliers of weapons and support which usually prolong conflicts, need be eliminated; pulling the plug is the only effective way to deal with conflicts.

Administrative reforms need to be introduced in the UN. There indeed is some truth to the critics' statement that the UN is a Cold-War organization; it needs reform in order to work well in the post Cold-War context. The UN secretary general has the right idea about reforms, he only needs real, unwavering international support and commitment.

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