

Our Mission Remains Vital

By Kofi A. Annan

In the past year I have read many attacks on the United Nations -- quite a few, but by no means all, in the pages of this newspaper.

That pains me, because I have served the U.N. all my life. I have done, and am still doing, everything I can to correct its imperfections, and to improve and strengthen it. And I believe profoundly in the importance of that task, because a strong U.N. is of vital importance to humanity.

When the appalling disaster of the tsunami struck in the Indian Ocean, killing at least 150,000 people and destroying the livelihood of millions, President Bush acted quickly to form a core group of nations with available military forces in the region. That was the right thing to do. It got the relief efforts off to a flying start, which was essential.

But a week later, when all involved came together in Jakarta to plan and coordinate the multinational effort, everyone, including the U.S., agreed that the U.N. should take the lead.

Why? For two reasons.

First, the U.N. had the necessary skills. Its Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which I formed in 1997 soon after I took office, is designed exactly for the role that was required -- a light structure, not getting in anyone's way or doing their job for them, but able quickly to locate needed supplies and contact whatever organization can deliver them.

But second, and even more important, everyone was willing to work with the U.N.: the governments and people of the affected countries, the donors, and the nonprofit organizations whose role is so essential in all emergencies, great and small. All of them recognize that the U.N. is the right body to lead, because it is in no one's pocket. It belongs to the world.

Another example of the U.N.'s importance -- a more difficult one, because of its sharply divisive political context -- is Iraq.

Indisputably, the war in Iraq two years ago caused many people on all sides to lose faith in the U.N. Those who favored military action against Saddam Hussein were disappointed that the Security Council did not -- as they saw it -- have the courage to enforce its own resolutions. And those who opposed it were frustrated at the U.N.'s inability to prevent a war they thought unnecessary or premature.

And yet, when the U.S. and its allies wanted an Iraqi body with broad national and international support to help them run the country, they turned to the U.N. and my special representative, Sergio Vieira de Mello, for help and advice. He persuaded L. Paul Bremer that it should be a Governing Council, not a mere advisory body, and he persuaded key Iraqi leaders such as Ayatollah Sistani to let their followers join it. Sergio and 21 of his colleagues paid with their lives for their courage and determination to help the Iraqi people -- as, alas, do too many brave servants of the U.N. whom the world hears little about.

Last year, when the Coalition wanted to transfer power to an interim Iraqi



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government, they turned again to the U.N. for help. They knew that if the U.N. were involved in choosing it the new government would have a much better chance of being accepted as legitimate and sovereign.

Both Iraqis and Americans also turned to the U.N. for help in organizing last month's elections. The U.N. helped to draft the electoral law and the law on political parties, to choose and train the members of the independent electoral commission and hundreds of election organizers (who in turn trained thousands of others), and to draw up the voters' lists. It was also there to give advice on the actual conduct of the election, the vote count, and the announcement of the results. Again, we had the necessary expertise -- we have organized or helped organize elections in 92 countries, including most recently Afghanistan and Palestine. But even more important was the legitimacy that our involvement brought. The results of an election organized by the Coalition powers, or by Iraqis that they had chosen, would have been less widely accepted in the outside world, and probably in Iraq as well.

Now Iraqis have their own elected Transitional National Assembly, and will soon have an elected government answerable to it. The assembly has to draft a constitution acceptable to all Iraqis, and the government has to isolate its most violent opponents by winning the trust of groups who did not vote in the elections -- mainly Sunni Arabs -- and bringing them into the political process.

Here too, the U.N. can help -- and it will. We can give expert advice, if asked, on the drafting of the constitution. We can reach out to those groups -- mainly Sunni Arabs -- who stayed away from the elections, for whatever reason, but are willing to pursue their goals through peaceful negotiation and dialogue. And we can bring together the world community in a joint effort to help Iraq rebuild itself and heal the wounds of dictatorship and war.

Even the scars left by past differences can be turned into today's opportunities. Precisely because the United Nations did not agree on some earlier actions in Iraq, today it has much needed credibility with, and access to, Iraqi groups who must agree to join in the new political process if peace is to prevail. The U.N. can be useful because it is seen as independent and impartial. If it ever came to be seen as a mere instrument or prolongation of U.S. foreign policy, it would be worthless to everyone.

I could go on. I could speak also about the 18 peace operations we have in war-torn countries around the world, and the tens of millions of homeless and hungry people, over and above those affected by the tsunami, to whom we are bringing relief. Indeed, when ill-informed critics try to cut the U.N. off at the knees, the people they hurt most are not diplomats or bureaucrats but innocent people caught in war or poverty, in desperate need of the world's help.

Some decry what they see as a lack of principle in U.N. decision-making, pointing to the compromises that inevitably emerge from a body of 191 member states. Anyone who attacks the U.N. for failing to serve the global interest should, as part of that exercise, critically examine the decisions of each nation within the body. They will find that there is plenty of criticism to go round. But they should also remember that the U.N., like the U.S. and other great democracies, is a work in progress -- always struggling to lessen the gap between reality and the ideals which gave it birth. That such a gap exists is all the more reason why those who value freedom and peace should work to build the U.N. up, not tear it down.



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Of course the U.N. is far from perfect -- even if some of the recent allegations made about it have been overblown. The interim report of Paul Volcker's independent inquiry has helped put the Oil For Food program in perspective. Some of the more hyperbolic assertions about it have been proven untrue.

Yet I am the first to admit that real and troubling failures -- ethical lapses and lax management -- have been brought to light. I am determined, with the help of member states, to carry through the management reforms which are clearly called for by Mr. Volcker's findings.

Even more shocking are widespread cases of sexual exploitation and abuse of minors by peacekeepers and U.N. officials in the Congo and other African countries. Both the U.N. Secretariat and the member states have been too slow to realize the extent of this problem, take effective measures to end it, and punish the culprits. But we are now doing so, and I am determined to see it through.

In my eight years as secretary-general, I had already done a lot -- with the support of member states, often led by the U.S. -- to make the U.N. more coherent and efficient. Now we need to make it more transparent and accountable -- not only to diplomats representing member governments, but also directly to the public.

The U.N. cannot expect to survive into the 21st century unless ordinary people throughout the world feel that it does something for them -- helping to protect them against conflict (both civil and international), but also against poverty, hunger, disease and the erosion of their natural environment. And in recent years, bitter experience has taught us that a world in which whole countries are left prey to misgovernment and destitution is not safe for anyone. We must turn the tide against disease and hunger, as well as against terrorism, the proliferation of deadly weapons and crime -- starting, urgently, with decisions from the Security Council to end the abominable crimes in Darfur and bring war criminals to international justice.

This September, we have a real opportunity to make the U.N. more useful to all its members. Leaders from all over the world are coming to a U.N. summit in New York. I shall put before them an agenda of bold but achievable proposals for making the U.N. work better, and the world fairer and safer.

I know that Americans want to do that as much as any people on earth. More than any other people, they have the power to do it -- if they listen to and work with others, and take the lead in a concerted effort. I believe that they will give us that lead. I look forward to September with hope and excitement.

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