

Is the UN's birthday really worth celebrating?

Daniel Mandel

It is now 60 years since diplomats convened in San Francisco for the conference that in due course gave birth to the United Nations. The horrors of the Second World War had led statesmen from countries great and small to devise a council of nations to prevent the worst excesses of international conduct.

An admirable ideal, to be sure, but it has not worked out that way. Its founders were idealists, some extravagantly so, but all would be amazed at the Frankenstein creation that now sits on Manhattan's East River. Many blame the Cold War for stunting the world body, but that is to confuse symptom with cause.

Here are some reasons for UN delinquency:

The UN General Assembly is not a parliament or democratic body. Member states represent not peoples, but governments, many of them squalid dictatorships, of vastly differing sizes and political persuasions. This means that the vote of Iceland (population: 293,000) or Burundi (6,825,000) carries the same weight as the vote of the United States (293,027,000) or China (1.2 billion).

In Australian terms, imagine the House of Representatives consisting of each State represented by an equal number of members, and the voting determined in many of these States by cliques of gangsters, not the people. The gerrymander and fraud on democracy then become obvious. (To the anticipated objection that the Senate is likewise composed of equally represented States—the Senate is but an element in a genuinely democratic system, a house

of review designed to protect smaller constituent States, a feature of many bicameral parliaments).

The UN Security Council is beholden to the veto power of five very different permanent members. Undoubtedly, this prevents the UN from doing much that is wicked, but also most which is decent. The rare occasions on which the UN came to anyone's rescue—South Korea in 1950 and Kuwait in 1991—were made possible by a Soviet boycott in one case (never repeated) and a rare abstention from China in the other.

In 1999, it fell to NATO, not the UN, to intervene to prevent the slaughter and expulsion of Kosovars, as the UN could do nothing in the face of a Russian veto cast in favour of Serbia. And in the earlier case of Bosnia, the sole UN contribution (besides inaction) was to impose a general arms embargo that gladdened many internationalist hearts but in reality left Bosnians under-equipped against a well-supplied Serbian army virtually unaffected by the embargo.

But none of this is new. It was pre-figured as early as 1948 when the UN failed to enforce the partition of Palestine when Arab states indicated an intention to invade and abort the UN-



endorsed plan. The toothless UN Palestine Commission, charged with implementing the creation of Jewish and Arab states, issued a plea for urgent UN action, observing that 'A dangerous and tragic precedent will have been established if force, or the threat of the use of force, is to prove an effective deterrent to the will of the United Nations'. Subsequent events have fully vindicated this bleak prophecy.

Blocs of nations connive to render the UN impotent. For example, no discussions are held, resolutions passed or action taken on China's obliteration of life and culture in Tibet. ▶

For another, France, Russia and China were able, for self-interested reasons, to prevent the Security Council enforcing its own resolutions on Iraq, leading the US and its allies to do so on their own.

For a third, blocs can simply prevent UN action on even the most serious matters—witness the present immobility of the UN with regard to the genocide being perpetrated in Darfur in the Sudan. An estimated 180,000 have been killed and two million made homeless and, up to the time of writing, the killings continue in the absence of any concerted international action from the body that many critics of the recent Iraq war assert must be the sole agency of collective action.

For a fourth, the 56-nation strong Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) has effectively vetoed any definition of terrorism that does not exempt Palestinian terrorism from its ambit, with the result that, even four years after the attacks of 11 September 2001, no UN definition of terrorism exists.

Lack of democracy and human rights is no barrier to UN membership and participation. Thus, its Human Rights Commission has lately included six of the world's most politically repressive regimes (Cuba, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Libya, China, Vietnam) one of which (Libya) recently presided over it. The committee overseeing women's rights was recently headed by Iran, a country well known for so-called 'honour-killing' of wives and daughters. And while Saddam ruled in Baghdad, the UN committee on disarmament was presided over by Iraq.

Fatal structural flaws have rendered the UN ineffective and corrupt. Thus the oil-for-food scandal, whereby providing humanitarian aid for Iraqis purchased from revenue obtained by the sale of Iraqi oil degenerated into a network of graft that enriched Saddam and a host of middlemen, including UN officials. Involving thousands of contractors in dozens of countries, the programme is estimated to have encompassed \$9-17 billion.

In the recent tsunami disaster, it was the American and Australian navies that swiftly deployed forces to assist survivors. The best the UN could dispatch in that time were a group of concerned bureaucrats.

UN peace-keeping and monitoring operations have also been conspicuously ineffective. Thus, the abject withdrawal of the peace-keeping force in Sinai in 1967, at the request of Egypt's Gamal

ing weapons stockpiled for this purpose by Hutus, but had been ordered instead simply to evacuate personnel.

A satirist could scarcely conceive so perverse a record. As the Israeli statesman Abba Eban put it in 1967, 'What is the use of a United Nations presence if it is, in effect, an umbrella which is taken away as soon as it begins to rain?'. Recent history has afforded many opportunities for revisiting this all-important question.

Embroiled in multiple crises (UN personnel raping women and minors in African countries is another), Annan has made a beeline for the drawing board and returned with a package of proposed reforms—a new panel to critically assess UN performance, new procedures for UN staff misdemeanours, and so on. Less well publicized is the fact that these ideas and others are a rehash of measures already proposed and supposedly implemented by Annan years ago.

Clearly, this is not the 'common and indispensable home of the human family' of which Secretary-General Kofi Annan gushed when opening last year's 59th session of the General Assembly.

In short, there is little to celebrate 60 years on, and even less reason to expect positive change. The US, which provides a quarter of the UN's budget, and other democracies need to consider new ways of spending taxpayers' money—holding the UN to performance standards before disbursing funds, backing a new caucus of democratic nations and reallocating funds to external initiatives that actually do some good, to name a few.

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Nasser, preparatory to Egypt pouring tanks and men into the formerly demilitarized zone ahead of a much-heralded war with Israel which actually produced a massive Arab defeat. Or the disarming in 1995 of Muslims in the supposed safe haven of Srebrenica, leading to their slaughter and expulsion while their authorized protectors stood by. Or, again, the enforced passivity of UN forces at the vital moment in Rwanda, permitting the massacre of up to 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus, for which failure responsibility lies credibly at the door of the current UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. (Admittedly, the US contributed mightily to this piece of inaction, the Clinton Administration fearing a repetition of the previous year's blood-letting in Mogadishu, where US forces had remained at the UN's request to assist its reconstruction after devastation by competing warlords.)

It is now known that General Romeo Dallaire, the Canadian commander of the UN force in Rwanda, had warned of impending slaughter, proposed seiz-