



Uniting for Peace
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Action for UN Renewal and
World Disarmament Campaign



United Nations for 21st Century?

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Reforming the UN for the 21st Century

Public Meeting
Wesley's Chapel
49 City Road
London EC1Y 1AU

16th April, 2011
10:30am – 5:00pm

Other Speakers are:

Rev. John Johansen-Berg [The UN, NGO's and Development]
Lord Peter Archer [UN and International Law] and
Rev. Brian Cooper [UN and Interfaith Harmony]

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1. Introduction

It is sixty five years when United Nations' was founded after the horrors of World War II, with a vision

“...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)

Legend has it that when US President Franklin D. Roosevelt coined the term ‘United Nations’, he was so excited that he burst into the bathroom to speak to the visiting Winston Churchill only to find Churchill in the tub. Apparently Churchill brushed aside FDR’s apologies, saying “The Prime Minister of Great Britain has nothing to hide from the President of the United States”

So six decades after it is as good a time as any to evaluate its successes, strengths and failures. For outsiders, dealing with the United Nations and insiders, working in the United Nations system, two most important issues always remain uppermost on their mind. First one is, can the United Nation be adequately reformed to face the realities of the modern world? Secondly, how it can be strengthened to become a truly global player whose decisions matter and are carried forward by the biggest and most powerful nations along with smaller nations.

There are opposite camps that have different and opposing opinions about what the United Nations stand for and what it can achieve. One camp believes that United Nations is the only institution which confers legitimacy on the important decisions, challenges and threats faced by the world today. It has a unique representative authority which allows it to provide a framework to tackle global problems such as poverty, conflict, proliferation of nuclear weapons and climate change. They furthermore say there is no alternative to UN and if we never had the United Nations, we would need to invent one.

Another camp has the opposite view that United Nation is irrelevant and bureaucratic, a tool to carry forward the agenda of the western powers. It should have been got rid of long time ago as it serves no purpose. One of the notorious proponents of this point of view is former US ambassador to UN, John Bolton. He once said, “There's no such thing as the United Nations. If the U.N. building in New York lost 10 storeys, it wouldn't make a bit of difference.”

Then there is a group of countries who forge alliances outside the UN likes of G8, G20 and G77 who increasingly get frustrated by the consensus criteria of the UN where all the countries have to agree to decisions taken by 192 countries. This way, this group of countries can meet together and take decisions outside the UN which will have consequences for the rest of the world without their participation. The unilateral decisions by the US and Britain to go to war in Iraq, illegal in the opinion of the world is one of them.

I’m writing an introduction to a book on Erskine Childers, to be published in 2011 by Dag Hammarskjold foundation. Erskine Childers was a UN free thinker, critic and constructive analyst. He was also a President of WUFNA and was giving a passionate speech on UN in Luxemburg when he had a heart attack and died. The other day, I was reading Erskine Childers’ talk, “Strengthening the United Nations System in a Time Beyond Warnings” which he gave in London in 1993. Most of his recommendations for UN reforms and its effectiveness are still relevant today and I am going to allude to some of them.

2. What reforms are needed and can they be implemented?

When we talk of UN Reforms, It suggests in itself that there is something wrong which needs reforming and fixing.

The essential Reforms are,

- a) International Peace and Security Reforms
- b) Security Council
- c) General Assembly Reforms

a) **International Peace and Security Reforms:**

Former Secretary General Kofi Annan famously called the UN “the only fire brigade in the world that has to acquire a fire engine after the fire has started.” Even when peacekeeping is the most appropriate protection tool, the UN must always overcome significant challenges to deploy and support each new mission.

UN is supposed to keep peace in the whole of the world with a two year tiny peacekeeping budget for 2010-2011 for \$ 5.2 billion. This is less than the half of the cost of the 2012 London Olympics, or about the same amount spent by US citizens on cut flowers and potted plants every year. Both Mc Donald’s and Coca Cola employ more people worldwide than the entire UN system.

The history of the UN peacekeeping is a mixed bag. There have been many successes in Cambodia, Mozambique, Haiti and Timor-Leste including long standing peacekeeping troops in Kashmir and Cyprus. Other missions are not so successful – Rwanda, Kivu in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Darfur in Sudan.

The UN has failed to stand up to dictators and perpetrators of genocide. Its failure to halt the Rwandan genocide in 1994 to intervene in Srebrenica massacre in 1995 and its failure to stop the humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka are a few examples of its impotency on the major issues of the day. One of its agencies, UN Human Rights Council’s obsession with criticising Israel and its failure to halt genocide in Sudan shows that the newly formed human rights council is not working.

2010 has been one of the worst years which the role of UN and the international community has diminished to a low level. The escalating war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the ongoing problems in Middle East, Iran and North Korea are a few examples where the UN and international community have not been able to broker the peace.

Three of the largest peacekeeping operations in DRC, Darfur (Sudan) and Afghanistan, are not achieving the objective they were set out to do. Let me tell you what Ban-Ki Moon Secretary General of UN recently had to say about peacekeeping. “The United Nations is struggling to keep its peacekeeping missions staffed and supplied as the world endures an unprecedented combination of crises, i.e. food crisis, fuel crisis and financial crisis.

Among the peacekeeping reforms I am advocating the UN should have:

- Clear, achievable mandates for peacekeeping and peace-building missions, matched by the adequate resources.
- Regular and rigorous oversight of peacekeeping missions to ensure effectiveness on the ground.
- More emphasis on peace-building and conflict prevention in those countries where insecurity remains high.
- Support for the UN's review of international civilian capacity.
- Ensuring the review of the UN's Peace Building Commission in strategic and country-focused.
- Consideration of the UN Regular and Peacekeeping Budgets to take into account the current economic climate and the need to pursue good budget discipline, and more modernised cost-share calculations to secure value for money.

The bottom line in future peace keeping is that more efforts and resources should be spent on soft power, such as dialogue, diplomacy and reconciliation to end conflicts instead of military options.

b) Security Council Reforms:

Pretty much everyone agrees that the Security Council's permanent, veto-wielding membership reflects a bygone age, when what mattered was who won the Second World War. An increasingly unrepresentative, anachronistic Security Council speaks with diminishing authority. It is less able to debate the issues that matter, because important actors may be missing. And it is less able to hand down opinions that count, because they do not bear the seal of all the world's great powers. Whether you think the UN can accomplish a little or a lot, a better Security Council would be able to get more done.

Alas, the consensus ends there. Among today's permanent members France and Britain worry about their declining influence. China objects to Japan as a permanent member. Mexico and Argentina object to Brazil. Italy objects to Germany, and Pakistan objects to India. African states cannot choose between South Africa and Nigeria. Do you need a Muslim state? And if so, which?

Some of the essential reforms needed to deal with the five permanent members and their excessive power.

- Widen the membership of the Security Council to make it more representative.
- Tackle the veto – which puts all major reforms under the control of the existing permanent members.
- Change the way in which the SC orders military action in order to control the process.

c) General Assembly Reforms:

- 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.

- The Charter makes it clear that the General Assembly of all member states is the primary UN body. Article 15 says that “the Assembly shall receive and consider annual and special reports from the Security Council...and from the other Organs of the United Nations”.
- The chief limitation on its powers comes from Article 12 which lies down that when the Security Council is exercising its functions in dealing with matters of peace and security the Assembly shall refrain from making any recommendations. While this is a necessary condition it should be modified by a new rule which should be mutually agreed by both institutions.
- In cases such as the management of relations with Iraq, which began after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and has no sign of ending till now, the General Assembly has been virtually silenced. It must be possible for an interregnum to be agreed between them so that the stewardship of the Security Council can be investigated and if necessary challenged.
- The powers of the General Assembly should be enhanced so that it can play a vital role debating and deciding important international issues. At present, each autumn, it is faced with a daunting agenda and same resolutions year after year are put forward for discussion. The GA has ongoing 9,000 or so mandates, some of which are obsolete and redundant. Unfortunately, this responsibility has not been fulfilled till now. The UN’s agenda should be streamlined in order to devote more time to pressing threats and challenges facing the world today.
- On a positive note, the General Assembly has powers which can be activated for bringing Peace as the Uniting for Peace resolution of 1950 which was used to override the monopoly of Security Council for resolving the war in Suez.

Of course there are other reforms of the UN – eliminating human rights abuses, much needed funding for the UN, gender issues including the empowerment of women, system wide coherence – that are urgently needed to make the UN an effective, transparent and democratic institution.

3. Recommendations for strengthening the United Nations

The UK plays a key role at the UN. It is one of the 15 strong security council’s 5 permanent members’ which means it can play a key role in the decision making process of the united nation. In that respect it can help establish peace keeping mission and place sanctions on countries. Being a Security Council member of the UN it can help to make an effective and strengthened UN for ending wars, maintenance of international peace and security. It can set an example in the field of nuclear disarmament and secure a world free from nuclear weapons. It can also work for achieving the completion of Millennium Development Goals, and fighting climate change. UK should build a special relationship with the United Nations instead of one with the America which at times undermines part of global justice and the rule of law.

4. Conclusion

All the efforts to reform and strengthen the UN including the endless books and materials written on its usefulness and demise – has anything changed? In some ways it has gone worse

and other ways it has gone a bit better. The ideal of UN to get rid of the world of wars have taken a knock in the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and with drone attacks on Pakistan. UN is a bystander while America and NATO alliance attack Sovereign countries under the pretext of terrorism while violating Human Rights and freedom of these countries.

What has changed is that the permanent member of the Security Council are realising that they are no longer the superpowers of the world as they were once after the Second World War. Countries such as China, India, Brazil, Japan, Germany and others are playing a very important role in the 21st century and should be permanent members of the Security Council. It is increasingly being realised that if proper status and inclusion is not granted to the emerging giants, they will bypass the UN Security Council and take their own decisions as they will be the one who will be running the show in the 21st century.

The other things which has changed is the threats and challenges of terrorism, climate change and financial crises are so vast and huge that it cannot be tackled by one single country no matter how powerful it may be. We are living in an interdependent world, a global village in which co-operations and not rivalries will work for the survival of mankind.

Isn't it time for the United Nations to be more fully represent the people of the world, rather than just the victors of an ugly war from more than a half century ago? As a forum for all the nations of the world to debate and discuss on an equal level, the UN may well be the last great hope for peace and security on the planet.

A reformed, democratic, transparent and accountable UN, along with the cooperation of the international community and a strong civil society, can produce the result in consigning war to history and making the dream of achieving peace a reality.

Thank you for Listening.

Notes:

The following publications were consulted and excerpts have been taken from them during the writing of this article:

1. John Smart - A 21 century United Nations? It is about time- 2010.
2. Vijay Mehta Reforming the UN for the 21 century – Royal Overseas Club, Edinburgh Scotland 2010.
3. SIPRI. “Recent Trends in Military Expenditures- 2009 “.
4. Sir Mark Lyall Grant – from a talk given at APPG 2010.
5. Henry Bellingham MP, Foreign and Commonwealth office minister with responsibility for United Nations- 2010.
6. The Economist, ‘Thinking the Unthinkable.’ 11 November 2010

VM Centre for Peace
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www.vmpeace.org
www.action-for-un-renewal.org.uk

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

He along with his daughter Renu Mehta founder of Fortune Forum charity held two summits in London in 2006 and 2007. The summits raised over a million pounds for charity and 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, Press TV, Ajtak-24 hour Indian news channel, and Think Peace documentary, Canada, among others. The Sunday Times, Independent, Observer and Guardian newspapers, among other journals have written about him. His life is devoted to the service of peace, humanity and our planet

At present, Vijay Mehta is writing a book to be published in 2011. The subject is "Military Expenditure and its Relation to Poverty Reduction and Development."