

The United Nations and Its Future in the 21st Century Edited by Vijay Mehta The book is reviewed by Diana Schumacher in The Gandhi Way Newsletter of the Gandhi Foundation, Autumn 2005

Contributors Margaret Anstee, Jayantha Dhanapala, Denis Halliday, Rosalyn Higgins, Razali Ismail, Richard Jolly, Caroline Lucas MEP, Patricia McKenna, Paul Rogers, Ramesh Thakur, Jenny Tonge.
Spokesman for Action for UN Renewal 274 pages ISBN 0 85124 707 5 £10.

It is sixty years since the UN Charter was signed in San Francisco on October 24th 1945. The October date is now officially designated the annual United Nations Day. The very first meeting of the UN General Assembly was historical and extremely productive. It happened to be held in the Methodist Westminster Central Hall, London, which was 'requisitioned' by the UK Government for the purpose, being about the only suitably large and centrally located venue still standing in post-war London. The disgruntled Methodists had to relocate their Sunday services to the London Coliseum until the UN event was concluded. The Methodist Trustees' distress was particularly understandable, with the additional fact that alcohol, (supposedly the fuel of diplomacy!) was being served on their premises.

What has happened since (and is still happening at this moment), and the extent to which so many hard won peace treaties and UN agreements and institutions, are being undermined and eroded is partly the subject of this thought-provoking book. The text, based substantially on the Erskine Childers Lectures of 1997-2004, with some chapters added, looks at the strengths and weaknesses of the UN today, at the "Crossroads of Ideals and Reality" and at possible future reforms which may enable this noble organisation to serve as a useful instrument for building a culture of peace in the Twenty-first Century despite the undermining of certain self-interested Council members.

In 2005, the UN which was born of the highest ideals, is beginning to show all the stresses and strains of the sixty-year-old ageing process. After all the political, economic and social setbacks recently endured there is every indication that we are at what Kofi Annan claimed in 2003 as "a fork in the road". The UN Millennium Goals are not yet visibly being delivered, although we are over half way through the internationally agreed process. Certain senior UN members have decided to take unilateral action such as in the US/UK coalition in the war against Iraq. Poverty, famine, political and social injustice and environmental degradation are much more evident now than sixty years ago.

Whereas the statistics are not encouraging, the underlying reasons are extremely complex. Undoubtedly the UN was founded on an internationally agreed body of ethics, integrity and the concept of committed and collective mutual security. Its signatories were living in the aftermath of the Second World War which had left in its wake devastation, mistrust and misery endured by countless millions. Never again was the world to undergo the same disasters and in the past sixty years the UN has accomplished some very considerable achievements in the fields of conflict resolution, peace keeping and the successful targeting of certain social and environmental issues.

As can be seen from the list of contributors to Mehta's book, the views are all those of renowned experts, who have had considerable dealings with the UN and its multifaceted subsidiary organisations. They offer insights from different perspectives and traditions which makes for a balanced, if an overall somewhat pessimistic overview. Perhaps it is the materialism and economic greed of the last sixty years which has undermined the energy, ethics and integrity of the founders and the subsequent Secretary-Generals of the UN ? We are left with many proposals and possible scenarios for UN reform, accountability and possibilities of its strengthening in order to build a safer world. The question is who will take responsibility ? Will countries put aside their national and economic interest for the benefit of the world body ? By what new or strengthened instruments will this be achieved ?

The Afterword and Appendices (pp 166-283) are essential reading for

understanding the history, aspirations and mechanisms of the UN. On the whole these are reports of documents, summaries of declarations and recommendations including UN pronouncements on Civil Society and Global Governance (which now require more explicit formulation). The UN Declaration of Human Rights (December 1948); The International Court of Justice; The UN Development Goals, and the Hague Agenda for Peace and Justice in the 21st Century are also essential reading or revisiting. So, metaphorically armed by the information and insights assembled so masterfully by Vijay Mehta, what can Gandhians do to make a useful and positive contribution to UN efficacy ? What is our shared responsibility for a safer and nonviolent world ?

Apart from looking at our own lifestyles and economic demands which may curtail or contribute to the lifestyles of others (and this is a personal choice for each), I should like to quote the words of Erskine Childers in the concluding chapter of his final book *The Challenges to the United Nations: Building a Safer World* (St Martin's Press 1994):

"It is time, indeed it is overtime, to empower those whom the Charter proclaims to be the first authors of the United Nations - 'We the Peoples'. In addition to the needed strengthening of NGO roles and access, we must press our governments now to do what even in 1945 (UK) Foreign Secretary Ernest Sevan (no 'dreamer') called a necessary 'completion' of the architecture of San Francisco."

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century depends on a new generation of thinking. In a world which is currently suffering from numerous wars, internecine strife, terrorism, social and economic injustice and environmental degradation, each of us has to bring into each situation and in each present moment hope, unity and forgiveness. It is only through building bridges in our immediate circumstances and local community that the world community will reach the aspirations in the UN Charter.

"We the Peoples", by supporting and helping to strengthen the United Nations will be building a safer world for future generations. This book will equip you with some of the necessary tools.

Diana Schumacher