

Reflections on the UN

from Keith Hindell

on receiving the Award for Distinguished Service to UNA-LASER



There's an old but good joke about the UN which runs like this:

Someone was walking down 1st Avenue in New York looking for the UN.

Not seeing where he thought it ought to be he asked a passer-by:

"What side is the UN on?" To get a smart reply:

"On our side, I hope".

In a way it expresses the view of every member state. They all put their own interests first but the more sensible states realise the UN is an essential Institution. First and foremost it's neutral ground for nations to discuss mutual problems in their early stages and to share ideas, to exchange news and discuss emerging international issues. Of course the UN was born while some of the horrors of the Second World War were still going on hence that lofty aspiration in the Charter:

"To save succeeding generations from the scourge of war"

It has made a considerable difference in this vital area but it's achievements have too often been disappointing. It has mitigated the dire effects of war by establishing agencies to help refugees from conflicts with shelter, care, education and medical services, often for years. It has invented the stop gap of Peacekeeping where troops under UN Command, lightly armed, prevent or disperse or deter minor flareups from developing into serious violence. At the moment there are 13 Peacekeeping Operations in the field involving about a hundred thousand personnel and costing \$6.6 billion dollars a year. That's about half of one percent of the global defence budget. It should also be said that some of these operations are very fragile and make little impact on a situation. And then always it seems other conflicts are also brewing up in other parts of the world which are new candidates for a Peacekeeping Operation --just now both Haiti and Colombia might need a UN force.

While Peacekeepers are in place the UN also tries to initiate peace talks and to mediate the disputes. Such mediation is admirable but it is very hard going and very slow. Too often it's fruitless as for example in Cyprus, Palestine, Kashmir, Western Sahara, and Syria. But it has had successes as in Bahrain, Trieste, East Timor, El Salvador, Tajikistan, Mozambique and, lest we forget, Afghanistan where the UN helped the Russians to withdraw with a semblance of dignity.

The latest successes were in the Ivory Coast in 2016 and most recently in Libya where the UN Mediator has very recently brought about a ceasefire and a promise by the warring parties of negotiations towards peace.

Beyond security the UN has given birth to more than thirty agencies and institutions which share the world's knowledge and expertise in ways which enhance mankind as a whole. The UN Development Programme, the World Food Programme, the International Maritime Organisation, UNESCO and many more. Most important right now is the World Health Organisation, when even the richest and

most scientifically advanced countries strain all their resources to cope with COVID 19. It's vital that WHO coordinates and inspires more assistance for poorer countries.

All of these UN organisations demonstrate the Member States' aspirations to cooperate for a better world. There are many shortcomings but nearly all of them have contributed to a better world.

When you work at a UN centre such as New York or Geneva it's often easier to see the failures, to hear the lies of some of the ambassadors and if not lies then exaggerations or dumb denials which make one wince. Sometimes you see them obeying instructions from their Foreign Offices which they can only just stomach. One such instance I recall from 1980, when the UN General Assembly voted to admit Ieng Sary as the delegate from Kampuchea previously known as Cambodia. At the time Vietnam had ousted Pol Pot's ghastly regime from most of Cambodia but the Assembly insisted by a large majority, that Kampuchea was still the "lawful government" despite having murdered hundreds of thousands of its citizens. This decision was made even worse when, at a ceremony arranged by the Secretariat, Ieng Sary signed three Human Rights Conventions. I stress Human Rights Conventions!!

Britain went along with all this charade although our ambassador dashed out of the room as soon as he could, thereby avoiding the need to shake hands with Ieng Sary. Many years later Sary was put on trial for genocide but died in prison before the trial was concluded.

Another bizarre moment occurred right in the Security Council Chamber. Just as a session was about to begin, a Chinese American threw red paint over the Soviet and American ambassadors, Oleg Troyanovsky and William van den Heuvel. It turned out that this man was actually an anti-Maoist and more revolutionary than Mao. Why he targeted the Soviet and American diplomats was never made clear. Anyway this deplorable incident, which could have been worse, led to a brief moment of solidarity between the Soviet Union and the United States. After the man was arrested the two diplomats, covered in paint, went arm in arm down the corridor smiling all the way to find clean clothes. The session was suspended for a while.

This incident showed that behind the hard work and tough rhetoric the UN is quite a human or even friendly place. But whether or not the actors there live up to the ideals of the Charter, the world cannot do without the UN. Britain too cannot do without the UN and we, members of UNA, as active, informed citizens, should always remind our governments of whatever colour that they should use their privileged position there – remember we were among the prime movers – to maintain peace and harmony and to foster the UN Agencies. It's very much in our own interest to foster a peaceful, healthy, educated world, and if possible a more equal one.

UNA has been there since before the UN was born. In fact ever since the birth of the League of Nations in 1919. The League of Nations Union had many thousands of members; so indeed did UNA at one time. Public interest and media interest have declined but we must keep it alive. We must continue to do our best to inform the public as to the UN's achievements.

Things like the elimination of smallpox and the provision of clean water, the education of women and the elevation of their status worldwide, rising slowly towards equality. And we must use our knowledge to ensure that our governments continue to make the UN a priority concern and to live up to its promises: just now the commitment that we should devote 0.7 per cent of GDP to foreign aid. We have run up huge debts in fighting the plague but we are still in a far stronger position than most other countries. We should help many poorer countries to recover from COVID 19. UNA should press all governments hard to do the right thing - it's in our own interest as much as being a moral imperative.

Good fortune to UNA London & South East Region!

