

Reflections on the UN

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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 it where he thought it ought to be he asked a passer-by: "What side is the UN on?" and got a smart reply: "Our side, I hope."

In a way that 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 and to share ideas, to exchange news and gossip about other states. Of course the UN was born while some of the horrors of the Second World War were still going on. So it adopted in its preamble that lofty aspiration:

"To save succeeding generations from the scourge of war"

It has made a difference in this vital area but its achievements have sometimes been disappointing. It has mitigated the dire effects of war by establishing agencies to help refugees from conflicts with shelter, care, and medical services, often for years. It has invented the stop-gap of Peacekeeping where troops under the UN Command, lightly armed, prevent or disperse or deter minor flare-ups from developing into a resumption of serious violence. At the moment there are 13 Peacekeeping Operations in the field involving a hundred thousand personnel, costing \$6.6 billion a year. Sounds a lot but it's only about half of one per cent of all the global defence budgets.

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 brewing up in other parts of the world which are new candidates for UN Peacekeeping; just now both Kazakhstan and Bosnia (yet again) might need a UN force.

While peacekeepers are in place the UN tries to promote peace talks and mediate the disputes. Such mediation is admirable but is usually 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 in 1989 the UN helped the Russians withdraw with a semblance of dignity.

The latest successes were in Ivory Coast in 2016 and most recently in Libya where a UN mediator brought about a ceasefire and a promise of negotiations towards a permanent peace. (Alas this situation currently in 2022 looks very fragile.)

Beyond security the UN has given birth to more than 30 institutions which share the world's knowledge and expertise to enhance mankind as a whole. The UN Development Programme, the World Food Programme, UNESCO, UNICEF and right now the World Health Organisation, when even the richest and most scientifically advanced countries strain all their resources to cope with COVID 19.

All of these organisations demonstrate the member states' aspirations to cooperate for a better world.

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

Britain went along with this travesty although our ambassador Tony Parsons dashed out of the room as soon as he could to avoid the need to shake hands with Ieng Sary. Many years later, Sary was put on trial by the new Cambodian government on a charge of Genocide but he died in gaol in 2013 before the process 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 an 'anti-Maoist', more extreme than Mao himself. Why he targeted the Soviet and US ambassadors never became clear. Anyway this deplorable incident, which could have been much 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 off arm in arm down the corridor smiling all the way. The session was suspended for a while.

Such incidents show that behind the hard work and the tough rhetoric the UN is really quite a human and 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 cannot do without the UN and we, members of UNA as active and informed citizens, should constantly remind our governments of whatever colour, that they should use their privileged position there – remembering we were among the prime movers – to maintain peace and harmony and to promote the UN agencies. It's very much in our own interest to foster a peaceful, healthy, educated and more equal world .

UNA has existed 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 (as 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 necessity of the UN and to highlight its 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 towards equality. We must also use our knowledge to ensure that our governments continue to make the UN a priority concern and live up to their promises. Such as devoting 0.7% of our GDP to foreign aid. We have run up huge debts fighting the plague but we are still in a far stronger position than most countries. We should help many poorer countries by providing them with Covid vaccinations so that they too can recover. UNA should press all governments to 'do the right thing' – it's in our own interests as much as being a moral imperative.

I close by wishing good fortune to UNA London& South East Region (LASER).

by Keith Hindell.

Keith Hindell joined the UNA in 1968 but didn't become an active member until he spent four years in New York as the BBC UN Correspondent 1980-84. On returning to London he's been an elected member of the UNA Board and Chairman of the LASER Region 1997 -2001.