

Hans CORELL¹:

Towards an Effective United Nations²

Secretary-General Kofi Annan's proposal for reform of the United Nations, *In Larger Freedom*, is now being discussed within the UN. A High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly in September on the occasion of the UN's 60th anniversary is being used as leverage.

In reviewing the result of the discussions at the present stage, one must ask whether "We the Peoples of the United Nations" do not deserve a more frank, self-critical and convincing outcome, reflecting more clearly the lofty ideals upon which the UN was created. But at least the members of the UN seem to have come to some understanding. Over the last few days, the result of these united efforts have, however, been questioned by the U.S.

In the remarkable lecture that former U.S. Secretary of State Elihu Root delivered in acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize for the year 1912 he spoke of causes of war – among them race, local prejudice and national "amour propre" – and added: "With these go the popular assumption, often arrogant, often ignorant, that the extreme claims of one's own country are always right and are to be rigidly insisted upon as a point of national honor. With them go intolerance of temperate discussion, of kindly consideration, and of reasonable concession."

This is a colourful illustration to the thinking of one of the statesmen who worked relentlessly to end war and to achieve settlement of disputes by peaceful means. It would take two world wars before real action was taken. In 1945, under U.S. leadership, the United Nations was created "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war."

Over the years, the UN has served humanity well. But it is obvious that the Organization must do better and needs reforming. In reality, however, it is the Member States that are in need of reform.

Against this background and in light of what has transpired over the last few days it is interesting to study a proposal for UN reform put forward by a Task Force mandated by the U.S. Congress. In many respects it is similar to the Secretary-General's proposal. But it is

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focused on the UN from the perspective of American interests and America's international responsibilities. The Task Force asserts that there is "nothing exclusive" about the UN as regards American interests and that the UN is "one of the tools" that America, its allies, and other democracies use cooperatively on the basis of shared values.

It is true that there are many tools – as there should be! But the statement calls in question the U.S. commitment on a core point. It would seem that the U.S. does not want to recognize Article 103 of the UN Charter: "In the event of a conflict between the obligations of the Members of the United Nations under the present Charter and their obligations under any other international agreement, their obligations under the present Charter shall prevail."

This very important provision, recognized also by NATO, is fundamental to the system of collective security at the heart of the UN Charter. This is why the UN sometimes is – and must be – exclusive and why the UN Charter must prevail.

This applies, in particular, to the rules relating to the Security Council, the organ on which Member States have conferred "primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security." It goes without saying that its five permanent members – China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States of America – have a special responsibility here.

Regretfully, this is where the UN has failed the most. The Council's authority is at stake. Changing the Council's composition – the most contentious issue in the ongoing discussions – will not make a difference in this respect unless it is coupled with a change of attitude. If not, the question is whether a reform on this point really serves international peace and security.

The UN Secretariat is often criticized, and certainly the Secretariat can do better – as in any organization! But to someone who has served within this Secretariat it is clear that the fault is not so much with the UN organs as with Member States. The U.S. Task Force also recognizes that Member States often blame the Secretariat or the "UN" when the fault rests with them.

To achieve a viable UN reform, Member States must therefore be honest and look at their own performance instead of blaming the UN for their own shortcomings. Some Member States are not democracies and fall far short of what is required from a sovereign state in contemporary society. And, regretfully, there are democracies that do not fully respect human rights standards and the rule of law. Particularly troubling is the development in the U.S. over the past few years: Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, attempts to intimidate federal judges and its own journalists, etc.

In June, at the American University in Cairo, the present U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice remarked: "And given our history, the United States has no cause for false pride and we have every reason for humility." This is a refreshing attitude. If it reflects a genuine judgment, taking into consideration also the most recent U.S. history, the U.S. would certainly be in a better position to take the lead again.

Recent events demonstrate that the U.S. needs the support of the UN just as much as the UN needs the support of the U.S. And even if the real need for reform is within Member States, the world needs a strong and well functioning UN.

As Dag Hammarskjöld put it: “The principles [of the Charter] are, by far, greater than the Organization in which they are embodied, and the aims which they are to safeguard are holier than the policies of any single nation or people.”

A UN reform must command the support of a solid majority of its Member States. But there will be no viable reform of this “exclusive” Organization without the support of the U.S. Therefore, as in 1945, the U.S. must demonstrate competent leadership.

It is also important that the reform work does not get lost in details. The document that is now being discussed on the eve of the High-level Meeting contains more than 15 000 words (the UN Charter has some 9 000), of which 44 is the bleak ”reaffirm”. This document must be summarized in a way that makes clear that it emanates from the very highest level – Heads of State and Government – and that it can be understood by “We the Peoples of the United Nations”, in other words the general public.

The loadstar of this document must be the most important message of the UN Charter: Maintenance of international peace and security. Furthermore, the document should contain a clear recognition of the fact that peace and security cannot be achieved unless the whole world is engaged.

But most importantly: The document must include a clear acknowledgment that the Member States have not always complied with the obligations that the Charter lays upon them, followed by a genuine and sincere pledge to honestly and, not least, in a self-critical manner engage in the common peace effort in the future.

As is often the case in international negotiations the prospects may seem problematic in the final stages. However, it is not too late to achieve a document that makes it possible for the General Assembly to help strengthen in a constructive, credible and easily understandable manner an Organization to which there is really no alternative.

Sweden has a special responsibility here. In a few days time, Prime Minister Göran Persson will be presiding over the High-level Meeting, and on Tuesday, Jan Eliasson will take office as President of the General Assembly. It is therefore important that Sweden initiates a discussion on how to present the result of the Meeting.

It is of great importance to the UN’s credibility that the Member States produce a salient and less bureaucratic document that highlights the main issues and that clearly and unequivocally denotes that it is they who bear the responsibility for the World Organization – as was the idea.

In sum: A successful UN reform requires that Member States take their responsibilities seriously and remedy their own shortcomings. It requires that their leaders demonstrate the statesmanship that the world so badly needs. It demands: A clear acceptance of the UN Charter and its principles, as well as honesty, humility, and – precisely! – temperate discussion, kindly consideration, and reasonable concession.