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# TODAY'S UNITED NATIONS IN A CHANGING WORLD

Dick Thornburgh\*

During my recent one-year tour of duty as Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management at the United Nations, I had a unique opportunity to observe the day-to-day operations of that organization during a period of great change.<sup>1</sup> My assignment, undertaken at the request of United States President George Bush, was to join the team of the new United Nations Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and to provide an "outside" viewpoint on United Nations operations from the standpoint of integrity, efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

Vast changes have occurred lately in both the world-at-large and within the United Nations. These changes have provided an unprecedented challenge to the operations of the United Nations and an equally unprecedented opportunity to realize the goals set forth in the 1945 Charter establishing the organization.<sup>2</sup>

The end of the Cold War has brought about changes in the world, resulting in a new emphasis on the rule of law, establishing democratic institutions and concern for humanitarian needs, as well as for human rights.

Changes in the United Nations itself have expanded its membership to 184 nations, including nineteen new members in the past two years.<sup>3</sup> Concurrently, the United Nations has seen a shift from an era of passive

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1. This Essay is based on a speech delivered by the author at The American University, Washington, D.C., on March 22, 1993, and on his remarks before the International Security, International Organizations, and Human Rights Subcommittee of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the United States House of Representatives on March 5, 1993.

2. *See* U.N. CHARTER art. 1, paras. 1-4 (identifying the goals of the United Nations at its inception).

3. Telephone interview with the United Nations Public Information Center, in New York, N.Y. (Nov. 29, 1993).

refereeing of ideological differences to an era of actively addressing pressing challenges around the world. This renewed focus on collective security and the quest for a better quality of life for all has empowered the organization to revert to first principles and to begin to develop a consensus as how best to fulfill the expectations of the world's citizens. Whether the United Nations can accomplish this task poses one of the most vexing issues for the decade of the 1990s.

What are the specific challenges that accompany these opportunities? They are myriad and indeed daunting. The most visible and costly operations of the United Nations today are in the peacekeeping area. The number of peacekeeping operations has skyrocketed and their characteristics have changed substantially as the United Nations has become a virtual worldwide "911" emergency number. No longer are peacekeeping operations only of the traditional type, designed to monitor militarily the political settlement of hostilities. New institution-building exercises in areas such as Angola and Cambodia required a variety of diverse civilian skills as well. More recently, risky new peacekeeping operations where "there is no peace to keep" have been mounted to provide humanitarian aid in the former Yugoslavia and Somalia.

During the years from 1948 to 1987, the United Nations mounted a total of thirteen peacekeeping operations.<sup>4</sup> Since then, in the last five years, the United Nations has undertaken thirteen more operations, with other potential "hotspots" cropping up with regularity.<sup>5</sup> This quantitative change has been reflected in the increased personnel requirements to staff peacekeeping operations. From slightly more than 10,000 in 1987, peacekeeping forces now in the field total approximately 90,000 and could rise to above 100,000 by the end of the year.<sup>6</sup> Annual peacekeeping costs meanwhile have increased twelve-fold since 1987 to a total of \$2.5 billion in 1992, with a possible doubling of that amount this year.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, these new assignments are severely straining the financial and organizational machinery of the United Nations. Practices and procedures utilized during nearly a half-century of stalemate are proving

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4. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *Empowering the United Nations*, 71 FOREIGN AFF. 89, 89 (Winter 1992/93).

5. See Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace: One Year Later*, 37 ORBIS 323, 326 (Summer 1993) (quoting the Secretary General's estimate that "some seventy areas of conflict or potential conflict are said to exist throughout the world").

6. *Id.* at 327.

7. Dick Thornburgh, *Peace-Keeping: Problems of Administration and Finance*, Address at the Yale Center for International and Area Studies (Oct. 31, 1992) (transcript on file with The American University Journal of International Law and Policy).

inadequate for an era of around-the-clock, around-the-world action. The United Nations can no longer support these operations on a "business as usual" basis. Indeed, major operations like Desert Storm<sup>8</sup> and Restore Hope<sup>9</sup> have been, in effect, "subcontracted" out to the United States, the world's remaining superpower, in recognition of the logistical shortcomings within the United Nations.

Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali, in his "Agenda for Peace,"<sup>10</sup> has laid out an ambitious plan to help keep the United Nations abreast of its obligations. The Secretary-General has called for more preventive diplomacy, some form of ready reserve in the military sphere, greater flexibility in financing and procurement practices, and more reliance on regional organizations as a first line of defense.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, for the immediate future, costly and controversial peacekeeping challenges will abound and place a severe strain on United Nations' resources and finances. Major powers, such as the United States, will be re-examining the soundness of these operations from the vantage point of their national interests as well.

What about economic and social development and the need to deal with poverty, hunger, unemployment and stagnant economic growth? Particularly significant here is the increased emphasis on the creation of democratic institutions and market economies since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the communist model. I was first introduced to this development during my service as Attorney General of the United States in a series of historic meetings with our counterparts in the former Soviet Union, later with the Russian Federation, and with leaders in Eastern and Central Europe. In all of these efforts, the establishment of the rule of law was recognized to be absolutely necessary, both to ensure the protection of individual rights and to provide a firm basis for economic recovery. These same winds of change are now blowing through the developing world as more countries in Africa, Asia and South America also seek to establish multiparty political systems and

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8. See *Chronology of Operation Desert Storm*, GANNETT NEWS SERVICE, Jan. 31, 1991, available in LEXIS, Nexis Library, Papers File (detailing the chronology of Operation Desert Storm, which was aimed at liberating Kuwait).

9. See Karl Maier, *U.S. Operation in Somalia Short on Hope*, INDEPENDENT, Dec. 28, 1992, available in LEXIS, Nexis Library, Papers File (explaining the purpose of Operation Restore Hope, which is aimed to protect and secure the delivery of relief supplies to Somalia's starving population).

10. *Id.*

11. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace: One Year Later*, *supra* note 4, at 324-31.

stronger market economies to aid in their growth. These developments create quite a different set of challenges for United Nations efforts in the fields of economic and social development.

For example, the transformation in the role of the United Nations Center for Transnational Corporations exemplifies one of the most intriguing turnabouts in the economic field. The Center was established in the 1970s to check the inroads of giant multinational corporations into developing nations' economies and to provide a strict code of conduct for their activities. The Center is now being urged to facilitate the entry of these same corporations into developing countries and to promote their investment as a means of stimulating needed economic growth, increased employment and a better quality of life.

Here again, however, the United Nations finds its present structure challenged by additional demands. Indeed, structural changes in economic and social development endeavors are long overdue. The Secretary-General has noted: "Duplication is widespread; coordination is often nominal; bureaucratic battles aimed at monopolizing a particular subject are rife, and organizational objectives are sometimes in conflict."<sup>12</sup>

How has this condition developed? Many historic phenomena have produced this result. First, there are entirely too many councils, departments, conferences, boards and agencies dealing with economic and social development — everything from UNICEF to UNESCO, from FAO to WFP, from UNDP to UNCTAD.<sup>13</sup> Scores of agencies vie for attention and funding in all these areas. Moreover, many of these entities are separately funded and have independent governing bodies. Thus, the need for the United Nations to "speak with one voice" and provide a degree of coordination is constantly frustrated.

Certain reform efforts have been implemented. To provide some order within the organization, in early 1992, a number of separate operations were collapsed into a new Department of Economic and Social Development,<sup>14</sup> which has since, regrettably, been divided into three new de-

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12. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *Empowering the United Nations*, *supra* note 3, at 100.

13. The acronyms represent the following organizations: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO); World Food Programme (WFP); United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

14. See Dick Thornburgh, *Report to the Secretary-General of the United Nations*, Mar. 1, 1993, at 26-27 (expressing the importance of consolidation of "hodge-podge" programs into a single department and expressing regret over the splitting of that new entity).

partments. What is actually needed, nonetheless, is a complete overhaul. In my final report to the Secretary-General, I called for the establishment of a Development Council through which member states and the United Nations would be obliged to harmonize the present cacophony of voices on economic and social development policy.<sup>15</sup> Further, a unified United Nations' presence in each country should replace the present numerous outposts of separate components of the bureaucracy. More problems should be tackled and implemented on a regional basis. Comprehensive plans should be devised to promote the movement in both under-developed countries and economies in transition away from authoritarian political systems and state-run businesses towards multiparty democratic institutions and market economies.

Lack of funding is often not the problem in this area. Rather, the obstacles to economic change are usually an absence of an infrastructure for private investment and a lack of technical advice in areas of need. Within my own family, I have seen how these needs might be met. My son, David Thornburgh, currently Director of the Small Business Development Center at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, has recently undertaken a series of trips to the Russian Federation to advise prospective entrepreneurs on the establishment of enterprises in Nizhny Novgorod, a developing center of market economy activity. Many others are carrying out similar hands on efforts.

In the aggregate, however, financial problems *do* threaten the future of the United Nations. The organization currently runs the risk of becoming a victim of its own aspirations as the demand for resources outraces those readily available. The term "financial crisis" has become a permanent description of the organization's financial status. The United Nations is perpetually short of cash due to the late and uneven payments by member states of their assessments. At the end of 1992, arrears totalled over \$1 billion, nearly evenly split between the regular budget and peacekeeping assessments. Arrears have increased further in 1993, especially on the peacekeeping side.

On a positive note, the United States, traditionally the major contributor in arrears, paid almost all of its contributions last year and is in the process of liquidating past arrears under the five-year plan adopted by Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush.<sup>16</sup> President Bill Clinton

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15. *Id.* at 27.

16. See *U.N. Budget, Peacekeeping Costs Over \$1.5 Billion in Arrears*, REUTERS, Mar. 14, 1991, available in LEXIS, Nexis Library, Int'l File (discussing the enormous debt the United States as well as other member states owe to the United Nations, and

also has indicated his desire to see that the United States meets its financial obligations to the United Nations.<sup>17</sup> The member state with the second largest arrears is the Russian Federation.<sup>18</sup> I visited its leaders late last year to impress upon them the necessity of addressing this condition. Their current problems, however, obviously far transcend the mere inability to pay United Nations' assessments. Together, these two major contributors accounted for nearly sixty-five percent of the year-end arrears in payment.

To put the financial situation in perspective, the combined regular and peacekeeping budgets of the United Nations during 1992 were less than New York City's payments for police and fire protection during the same period! The problem is mostly one of cash flow, particularly with regard to peacekeeping operations where every start-up effort is similar to a financial "bungee jump," undertaken in blind faith that timely appropriations will soon be forthcoming.

To help with the financial situation, I asked the Ford Foundation to fund a review by a distinguished group of outside experts chaired by Paul Volcker, former Chairman of the Board of Governors of the United States Federal Reserve Board and Shijuro Ogata, former Deputy Governor of the Japan Development Bank.<sup>19</sup> Their report, which recommends a number of significant changes, awaits action.

Most of the problems I have referred to, sooner or later, end up in the United Nations Department of Administration and Management, which had required substantial strengthening when the new Secretary-General took office. To his credit, Dr. Boutros-Ghali made a strong commitment to restructure and reform the United Nations from the outset of his administration. The Department of Administration and Management became obligated to carry out the nuts-and-bolts operations to

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thus, the United States' promise to satisfy the debt over a five-year period).

17. In October, 1993, however, the United States Congress voted out a compromise appropriations bill which substantially underfunded contributions to United Nations peace keeping operations for the forthcoming year; refused to fund a \$175 million contingency fund for future unforeseen peace keeping operations; called for a reduction in the United States share of peace keeping costs from its current 31.7% to 25%; withheld 10% of the regular budget contribution until an inspector general's office had been established; and cancelled the fourth installment of the five-year plan to pay down accumulated arrears. *U.S. Peacekeeping Arrears at U.N. near a Billion*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 22, 1993, at A5.

18. *Id.*

19. SHIJURO OGATA & PAUL VOLCKER, FORD FOUNDATION, FINANCING AN EFFECTIVE UNITED NATIONS: A REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT ADVISORY GROUP ON U.N. FINANCING (1993).

create a more effective and efficient organization; this was no small task. In the words of former United States Permanent Representative Edward Perkins: "What is the difference between 'effective' and 'efficient'? The first means to do the right thing, the second means to do the thing right."<sup>20</sup> Our department attempted to achieve both these ideals through the introduction of a number of important reforms, aided substantially by McKinsey & Company's *pro bono* management consultant services.

During the last year, the United Nations accomplished the following specific reforms:<sup>21</sup>

1. A reduction of the number of high-level posts and the drawing of a clear distinction between "political" and "civil service" posts.
2. The merger and streamlining of a number of components of the organization to eliminate duplication and overlap.
3. The imposition of a "hiring freeze" and the subsequent re-deployment of about fifty percent of existing vacancies so as to put more resources into the field.
4. An overhaul of field operations to provide better support for initiatives in the growing areas of peacekeeping, humanitarian aid and political assistance.
5. A commitment to more training, especially management training, and a greater use of technology.

Nevertheless, substantial management problems remain. It will probably require the balance of the Secretary-General's five-year term to accomplish the needed reforms. As Madeline K. Albright, the United States Ambassador to the United Nations, has noted, "forty years of neglect have left this institution flabby and out of shape."<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, I also recommended in my report other specific changes which are as follows:<sup>23</sup>

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20. *First Public Hearing of the United States Commission on Improving the Effectiveness of the United Nations*, Philadelphia, PA (Oct. 23, 1992) (statement of Ambassador Edward J. Perkins, United States Permanent Representative to the United Nations) (transcript available from the United States Mission to the United Nations, press release #109-(92)).

21. See Thornburgh, *supra* note 14, at 2-4 (outlining the continuing structural changes in the United Nations and suggesting new ones).

22. United States Ambassador to the United Nations, *Keynote Address to the 1993 World Congress of the Business Council of the United Nations*, June 18, 1993, as reported in 7 BCUN BRIEFING No. 1 (Summer 1993), at 4.

23. See Thornburgh, *supra* note 13, at 9-32 (outlining suggestions for addressing



1. Elimination of "deadwood" from the organization and establishment of means to recognize outstanding performance.
2. An attack on "featherbedding" practices, such as the unnecessary employment of some five hundred typists in the translation service of the organization. The failure to introduce word processing into these mammoth activities defeats savings of \$20 million a year.
3. Introduction of modern management practices in field operations such as peacekeeping. McKinsey & Company estimated preliminarily that this reform would produce savings of as much as \$100 million per year.
4. A moratorium on further costly worldwide conferences. Nine additional such meetings are already scheduled over the next three years.
5. A reduction in the unnecessarily wide array of United Nations publications, often observed to be "printed in six languages and read in none." Some 1,300 reports, for example, were issued over the past eighteen months, many of dubious worth.
6. Adoption of a comprehensive code of conduct requiring key staff members to disclose fully financial matters in order to deter conflicts of interest and other wrongdoing.
7. Creation of an Inspector General's office to deal with problems of fraud, waste, and abuse, as well as to carry out important functions of audit, inspection, investigation and program evaluation.

Let me say a special word about the proposal for an Office of Inspector General. In my report to the Secretary-General, I noted that "the United Nations presently is almost totally lacking in effective means to deal with fraud, waste and abuse . . . ."<sup>24</sup> The chronically fragmented and inadequate structure for audit, inspection, investigation and program evaluation is currently so ineffective that pickup teams have to be mustered in order to investigate allegations of serious wrongdoing. The delay inherent in the process of recruiting and staffing these teams often allows the trail to "grow cold." The delay also deprives investigations of the vitality, professionalism, and impartiality that more regularized procedures attain.

The need for an Office of Inspector General is especially crucial given the mounting concern over the rising level of United Nations' expenditures in nearly every area. As noted in the Volcker-Ogata report,

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problems of fraud, waste, and abuse within the United Nations).

24. Thornburgh, *supra* note 14, at 29.

“support for improved financing will be dependent upon a perception that funds are economically managed and effectively spent.”<sup>25</sup> This will require the prompt activation of a strong Inspector General’s office. Whether these and other necessary reforms can be accomplished will depend not only upon the exercise of the necessary political will by the Secretary-General, but also upon the member states’ support for reform.

What is suggested is not reform for reform’s sake. All of these efforts are designed to produce changes that will enable the United Nations to face today’s totally unprecedented challenges and opportunities. While there are some who doubt that such change is possible, my own sense is that strong leadership and continued dedication on the part of those who support the United Nations will enable it to fulfill its mission.

That mission should not be obscured. As Dag Hammarskjöld, one of the first to serve as Secretary-General, noted “the United Nations was created not to bring mankind to heaven, but to save it from hell.”<sup>26</sup> The United Nations can accomplish this mission by continuing its important initiatives in peacekeeping, humanitarian endeavors, economic and social development, and human rights. But, efforts to improve its management are also vitally necessary and deserve our strong support.

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25. OGATA & VOLCKER, *supra* note 18, at 4.

26. BRIAN URQUHART, *A LIFE IN PEACE AND WAR* 92 (1991).