

“We Need Reform Not Because the UN Has Failed...”

IPS Columnist Service

Excerpts from an interview

Q: How should the UN be restructured to meet the needs of the 21st century? What is your vision for a future UN?

A: It is essential to make this 20th century organisation ready for the challenges of the 21st century. We need reform not because the UN has failed, but because it has succeeded enough over the years to be worth investing in. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." The UN, where I have worked for the last 28 years, is no exception. If we want to change the world, we must change too. This calls for completing the unfinished business of management reform, studying the report of the panel on system-wide coherence to see what institutional restructuring might be desirable, and strengthening its operational capacities in development, peacekeeping, humanitarian relief and human rights. As to my vision for a future UN, space does not permit me to express it fully (I have done so in several articles and speeches: see www.shashitharoor.com), but I strongly believe the organisation will only succeed as a recourse for all and not as the instrument of a few. It must amplify the voices of those who would otherwise not be heard, and serve as a canopy beneath which all can feel secure. The UN of the future must never forget that it is both a result and a source of hopes for a better world -- hopes that, in the most fundamental sense, all human beings share.

Q: What is the significance of your Asian origins that qualify you as the next leader of the UN?

A: The only significance is that it is Asia's turn to provide the next leader of the Secretariat – and it should be someone who embodies the spirit and the experience of this youthful, dynamic, pluralistic, transformative, and progressive continent.

Q: In a 192-member organisation based on the principle of one-nation, one-vote, do you think the 15-member Security Council is a political anachronism? If so, how should it be revitalised and reformed to reflect the realities of today?

A: There is no doubt that the Council reflects the geopolitical realities of 1945, not of 2006. Security Council reform is a structural issue at the UN; many countries believe that it needs to be reformed to make it more representative of the membership at large. Member States have been discussing reform for over a decade but have yet to agree on the shape of that reform. I sometimes joke it's like a bunch of doctors gathered around a patient who all agree on the diagnosis but disagree on the prescription! Until there is agreement amongst two-thirds of the Member States about a formula for Council expansion, there won't be a reform, and the job of the Secretary-General is to work with the institutions he has, since he has no power to change them -- only governments can. Pending such structural reform, I believe that the Council can be revitalized through the use of working methods that open its deliberations more fully to non members and associate them with the evolution of the Council's thinking on the key peace and security challenges of the day.

Q: If elected, what would be your priorities for the UN? Would you place more emphasis on the world's social and economic problems and less on political problems?

A: Deciding on the relative emphasis to be placed would hardly be up to the Secretary-General, since events make their own demands -- I doubt Kofi Annan intended in June to devote the bulk of his summer to Lebanon and travels in the Middle East. The single greatest problem facing the UN is that there is no single greatest problem; rather, there are a dozen different ones each day clamoring for attention. A clear set of priorities emerge from what we call "problems without passports" -- issues that cross all frontiers uninvited, like climate change, drug trafficking, human rights, terrorism, epidemic diseases, migration, and refugee movements, whose solutions, too, can recognise no frontiers because no one country or group of countries, however rich or powerful, can tackle them alone. Are these problems social and economic or political? I would argue they have elements of both. But I would certainly not allow the world to forget the problems that remain when the headline issues are forgotten -- above all the long-running tragedy of poverty and underdevelopment.

Q: Do you think the international community will meet the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals? If not, why not? And why is it that despite all the assistance provided by the UN over the last 60 years, it has still failed to help eradicate poverty?

A: It is clear that, though (at the 2005 World Summit) leaders from donor and developing nations alike made a strong and unambiguous commitment to achieving the MDGs by 2015, they are, for the most part, not on course to being met. Despite its remarkable successes in pulling millions out of poverty in recent years, Asia cannot afford to be complacent; Latin America is not much better off and Africa continues to struggle. The reasons are many and varied, and include bad policies, misgovernance and corruption, but also inadequate resources, disadvantageous terms of trade for developing countries, and the crippling legacies of colonial exploitation. But let us look to the future. We have the means, the technology, and the awareness to do what must be done to fulfill the MDGs. We must hold both rich and poor countries to their commitments, and work to ensure that the world develops mechanisms that should make successful and sustainable development more likely. Not all of this will happen at the UN -- the WTO and the Bretton Woods institutions, in particular, have a key role to play -- but the UN remains indispensable as the place where political agreement can be reached on development goals, where the agenda is set on issues that affect the well-being of the overwhelming majority of the world's people, and where the voice of each country is heard on that agenda.