

## **UNITED NATIONS REFORM: ON TRACK FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?**

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### **Summary**

Immediately after assuming the office of Secretary-General, Kofi Annan declared that reform was his first priority and quickly developed a program of reform measures, some of which he could introduce on his own authority and some of which required the approval of the General Assembly. These reforms did not result in a fundamental restructuring of the United Nations. However, organizational changes were made so that the United Nations could act with greater unity of purpose and coordination in meeting its core areas of responsibility: peace and security, economic and social affairs, development operations, humanitarian affairs and human rights. The staff of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations in the Secretariat was substantially increased. A Deputy Secretary-General was appointed whose responsibilities include monitoring the reform process. Greater participation of civil society was made possible. A beginning was made in modernizing the personnel system in the Secretariat. Perhaps most importantly the General Assembly approved a reduction in the percentage of the UN regular budget and the cost of peacekeeping operations paid by the United States. While not entirely solving the problem, this broke the logjam in US financial withholdings and encouraged the US to pay the major portion of its large indebtedness to the UN.

Following the US-led invasion of Iraq, there were new calls for further, more fundamental reforms so that the United Nations could better meet the threats, challenges and changes of the Twenty-first Century. After receiving the advice of a high level panel of eminent persons, the Secretary-General submitted a report to the 2005 World

Summit recommending wide-ranging reform of the structure, mandate and operational procedures of the United Nations and the policies of Member States. The General Assembly approved several of the significant reform measures recommended by the Secretary-General but not all. Whether these reforms will be sufficient to significantly improve the UN's capacity to meet critical security and human rights threats remains an open question.

## **1. The Genesis of United Nations Reform**

In his 1997 report to the General Assembly entitled "Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform," Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated that "reform is not an event; it is a process." Reform began almost with the creation of the United Nations. This process has shown no signs of ending. As a result of past reform initiatives predating Annan's reform programs, budget and staff growth had been held in check since the late 1980s; administrative economies had been introduced; controversies over the budget had been reduced with the introduction in 1987 of decision on the regular UN budget by consensus. Limited rationalization of procedures in the General Assembly and the Security Council had been effected; both the Security Council and ECOSOC had been enlarged and the latter subjected to altered schedules and agendas. But whatever the benefit of these changes, it was not sufficient to quell a chorus of demands for further reform as necessary to enhance the effectiveness of the United Nations in the post-Cold War era and to equip it to deal with the challenges of the twenty-first century.

At the 50th Anniversary summit meeting of the General Assembly in 1996, almost every speaker, whether from the north, south, east or west, after testifying to the indispensability of the United Nations, called for its urgent reform. Some countries, especially the US, called for greater economy, efficiency and less staff. All insisted that the growing demands and challenges that the United Nations faced in a new global environment required greater program coordination and discrimination in setting priorities. Ten years later, at the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit, the need for more wide-ranging reform to meet the challenges of terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and unilateral military action by Member States was the center of debate. This time the Assembly agreed to specific reform measures (albeit limited) in response to urgent and extensive recommendations of the Secretary-General.

## **2. Agents for Change**

In the context of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, there was wide agreement on the following points:

- the need for greater unity of purpose and action by the different parts of the UN system on economic development
- radical revision of ECOSOC or the establishment of replacement bodies
- greater democratization of the UN through enhancement of the role of the General Assembly and greater involvement of civil society
- enlargement of the Security Council to make it more geographically and economically representative

- revision of the voting procedure in the Security Council, including restriction of the veto power
- changes in the methods of financing the United Nations
- enhancement of the early warning capacity of the UN
- strengthening of the leadership of the UN by, *inter alia*, the appointment of one or more deputy secretaries-general
- revision of the Trusteeship Council, either through a change in its responsibilities or its elimination
- strengthening of the UN human rights establishment
- establishment of an International Criminal Court
- the holding of some form of assembly to permit greater civil society participation in the UN.

These themes would figure in all the subsequent reform proposals.

### **3. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's Comprehensive Reform Program**

Within 3 months of his appointment, Secretary-General Annan introduced a number of measures designed to transfer resources from administrative to economic and social programs, streamline the Secretariat and reduce costs. In July 1997 he presented his comprehensive reform program to the General Assembly in a lengthy report (A/51/950) that described the measures that had been taken or were proposed in the context of the social and political environment to be expected in the Twenty-first Century. The measures were divided into two parts: those that could be initiated by the Secretary-General on his authority (Track I) and those that required action by the General Assembly (Track II). The following is a selective list of the reform measures taken or proposed by Secretary-General Annan at that time with an indication of their status.

#### **Track I Proposals**

- Establishment of four Executive Committees to bring together all Secretariat departments, programs and funds in dealing with the core missions of the UN: peace and security, economic and social affairs, development operations, and humanitarian affairs, with human rights as a cross-cutting issue.
- Establishment of a Senior Management Group to assist the Secretary-General in achieving unity of purpose and direction in the work of the UN.
- Consolidation in a single office in Vienna of UN programs for combating crime, drugs and terrorism.
- Enhancement of the UN's capacity to respond faster to sudden emergencies including, *inter alia*, the training of military and civilian participants in peacekeeping exercises.
- Establishment in the field of common premises—a "UN House"—for all UN programs.

In addition, the Secretary-General called for a rejuvenation of the Secretariat (without specifying how) and the examination by a task force of experts of the entire approach to human resources which was both "ineffective and inefficient."

## **Track II Proposals (Requiring Authorization by the General Assembly)**

- Establishment of the post of Deputy-Secretary-General. This action was approved by the General Assembly. The Deputy-Secretary is in place.
- Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly by focusing legislative debates, streamlining the agenda, including sunset provisions in action resolutions and reducing the general debate from 3 to 2 weeks. The Assembly was unable to agree on most of these proposals..
- Establishment of a Special Commission, at the ministerial level, to examine possible changes in the UN Charter and in the treaties from which the specialized agencies derive their mandates. This proposal was not pursued as likely to involve legalistic arguments that would be counterproductive. Instead the Secretary-General has sought, with considerable success, to improve the working relationship with the specialized agencies on a case by case basis and through better use of the UN System Chief Executive Board for Coordination (CEB), formerly known as the Administrative Committee on Coordination.
- The convening of the General Assembly in the year 2000 as a special “Millennium Assembly” at which heads of state and government could articulate their vision of prospects and challenges for the new millennium. The Assembly approved the necessary preparatory steps to make possible the holding of the Millennium Assembly, which was held on schedule.
- Reconstitution of the Trusteeship Council as the forum through which Member States could exercise their collective trusteeship for the global environment and the global commons. Agreement could not be reached on this recommendation. The 2005 World Summit agreed to eliminate the Trusteeship Council.
- Adoption of a code of conduct for UN staff members. A code of conduct has been adopted. Consolidation and reconfiguration of ECOSOC’s subsidiary bodies. No specific organizational changes resulted from this recommendation but, in the spirit of the reform movement, working practices in many of these bodies have become more open, informal and generally productive.
- Development of a rapidly deployable military-civilian mission headquarters for peacekeeping operations; the establishment of a time frame for the conclusion of status-of-forces agreements for peace-keeping operations and pending such agreements, the provisional application of a model status-of-forces agreement. The Assembly endorsed these recommendations.
- Designation of a United Nations Humanitarian Assistance Coordinator and the establishment of a humanitarian affairs segment of ECOSOC. This was approved by the Assembly.
- Adoption of a "budgeting for results" system characterized by accountability for results rather than inputs. The Assembly approved this concept and the procedure is now being followed.

Outside the framework of the Secretary-General’s reform package, but within the context of reform a new apportionment (20%) of budgetary allocations was agreed by the General Assembly that reduced the US assessment to a level (for the regular budget) that was acceptable to the US Congress. This permitted the United States to resume full payment of its contribution to the regular budget and most of its assessments for peacekeeping operations. Financial problems will remain; but the crises of the 1980s

and 1990s that brought the UN to the brink of bankruptcy no longer threaten the viability of the Organization. These changes enabled the organization to act with greater unity of purpose, coherence of efforts and agility. The clustering of senior executives in the core UN fields in Executive Committees and in a Development Group and the establishment of the Senior Management Group chaired by the Secretary-General and, particularly, the enlargement of the staff and resources of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations enhanced somewhat the UN's capacity to meet the day-to-day political, military and economic problems with which the UN needed to deal. They did not, however, alter the basic structure or mandate of the United Nations or equip it to resolve the major challenges of the still new century.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**James S. Sutterlin** is presently Distinguished Fellow in UN Studies and lecturer at Yale University. He is also Director of Research and Adjunct Professor at the Long Island University Center for the Study of International Organizations. Sutterlin was a member of the UN Secretariat for 13 years, serving first as Director of the Political Affairs Division and then as the Director of the Executive Office of Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar. Before joining the United Nations, Sutterlin was in the American Foreign Service for 25 years, with posts in Germany, Japan, Israel and Washington. His last assignment prior to moving to the UN was as Inspector General of the US Foreign Service.

Sutterlin is the co-author of *Berlin, From Symbol of Confrontation to Keystone of Stability*, Praeger, 1989 and has written widely regarding UN matters. His latest work, co-authored with Dr. Jean Krasno is *The United Nations in Iraq: Defanging the viper. He is the author of The United Nations and The Maintenance of International Security, Meeting the Challenge*, Praeger, 2003 (second edition). He was responsible for drafting the memoirs of former Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, which were published in 1997 under the title *Pilgrimage for Peace*. He has written numerous articles and book chapters regarding the United Nations. Sutterlin has served as Chairman of the Academic Council on the United Nations System. At Yale, in addition to teaching, he is directing an oral history project on the United Nations and has organized a number of international studies related to multilateral diplomacy.