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HEADLINE: A moment of truth for the United Nations KOFI ANNAN

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BODY:

A minor storm broke out last week when Mark Malloch Brown, my deputy, made a speech suggesting that the US should engage more fully and wholeheartedly with other members of the UN to bring about reform. That is absolutely right, but he and I believe the same message needs to be heard in many other countries besides the US.

The UN faces a moment of truth. Last December, member states adopted a budget for the current "biennium" (2006-2007), but gave us authority to spend only enough to carry us through the first six months. The main contributors, led by the US, insisted that this spending cap should be lifted only when there is significant progress on UN reform. We are now perilously near the deadline and it is far from clear that enough reform to satisfy them has been achieved. Neither side has found a way of engaging with the other to agree on further reforms.

Sir Brian Urquhart, the UN's elder statesman, once said that there is never really a financial crisis at the UN, only political crises. He is right. The US is trying to use the power of the purse to force through badly needed management reforms and these tactics have provoked a reaction among developing countries.

Most of these are well aware of the need to reform - not least because it is in those countries that the UN provides vital services from peacekeeping and peace-building through emergency relief to strengthening human rights, helping organise elections and fighting infectious disease. That means they are the ones who have most to gain from a well-managed UN that really gives value for money. Their quarrel is much less with the detail of proposed reforms than with what they see as the overwhelming influence of a few rich countries. That was what I meant in London last January when I referred to the "feeling of frustration and exclusion that prompts many states to exercise the only power they do have: the power to block other reforms, such as better management - since some see even this as an attempt by the big boys to grab yet more power for themselves".

In the long run this means that, as Tony Blair, prime minister, recognised in a speech two weeks ago, the whole UN structure has to be reformed, including the Security Council. So even these current reforms are only a small down-payment on what must follow. Public policy is getting more global. From terrorism to poverty, drugs and crime, disease to trade, no state can settle matters alone. But even while we wait for political vision to catch up with the scale of today's challenges, we have vital work to do right now - programmes that have been mandated by members and provide essential services to people in acute danger or need. We must not let that work be stalled.

It is in all member states' interest to keep the UN running and adapt it to the specific work they want it to do. That means both sides in the argument need to turn down their rhetoric and engage in serious negotiations to work out a sensible compromise now as a basis for more fundamental change later. It is not just the composition of the Security Council that is stuck in

the mid-twentieth century. Both the management and the attitudes of many governments to the organisation are caught in the same time warp. Neither has fully adjusted to the new reality of a UN that no longer simply holds conferences and writes reports, but is managing complex, multi-billion dollar operations to help keep peace and combat poverty and humanitarian disasters. As a result, we do not have the institutions that we need to confront this century's global challenges. It is vital that we escape from this bind.

The reform blueprint that I put forward last year reminded us all that the UN is founded on three legs - development, collective security and human rights. And like any good chair they need a fourth: management reform. The UN has to help members advance on all three fronts at once. That is why it needs not only a Security Council but also an effective Human Rights Council, and why the Economic and Social Council must be transformed into a true development chamber to pursue progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goals, the effort to halve extreme poverty by 2015.

Some reforms have been achieved. Both the new Human Rights Council and the Peacebuilding Commission will meet for the first time next week. All member states have accepted responsibility to protect people threatened by genocide and comparable crimes. We have in place a much improved emergency relief fund, a democracy fund, an ethics office and a tougher system for protecting whistleblowers. Now we need better accountability and oversight arrangements, a stronger procurement system, more financial flexibility and better rules for recruiting and managing staff.

Set against the scale of the tasks, these are not such ambitious demands. Surely governments can agree on how to make these reforms happen without bringing the whole organisation to a halt. It is time for those who really care about reform to come together and form a new coalition - one that bridges the artificial, destructive divide between north and south and brings together all those who are willing to work together because they share the vision of a UN that really works, for the benefit of all the world's peoples.

The writer is UN secretary-general

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