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United We Stand

By Kofi A. Annan

This Sunday marks the 60th anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Charter in 1945. Debate about "reform" of the U.N. has been raging almost from that moment on.

This is because -- especially but not only in the United States -- idealism and aspiration for the U.N. have always outstripped its actual performance. For 60 years Americans -- conservative and liberal alike -- have expected much from the U.N. Too often, we have failed to meet those expectations.

In Washington, the debate now centers on two documents which appeared last week: the report of the bipartisan Task Force led by former Speaker Newt Gingrich and former Senator George Mitchell, and the Henry J. Hyde United Nations Reform Act, adopted by the House of Representatives.

There is considerable overlap between the two prescriptions, as there is between both and the reforms that I myself have proposed -- or, where they are within my power, am already implementing. That is not surprising. The desire for change is widespread, not only in the U.S., but among many other U.N. member-states, and also many U.N. staff.

All of us want to make the U.N.'s management more transparent and accountable, and its oversight mechanisms stronger and more independent.

All of us would like the General Assembly to streamline its agenda and committee structure, so that time and resources are devoted to the burning issues of the day, rather than to implementing resolutions passed years ago in a different political context.

All of us are eager to make the U.N.'s human rights machinery more credible and more authoritative, notably by replacing the present Commission on Human Rights with a Human Rights Council, whose members would set an example by applying the standards they are charged to uphold.

All of us would like to see a Peacebuilding Commission created within the U.N., to coordinate and sustain the work of helping countries make the transition from war to peace -- so that we do not repeat the dangerous relapse into anarchy that we witnessed in Afghanistan before 2001 and more recently in Haiti, as well as several African countries.

And all of us want to impose stricter standards of conduct on U.N. peacekeeping missions, especially to put an end to sexual abuse and exploitation.

Those are some examples, among many. I believe this convergence of expectations offers us -- perhaps for the first time in 60 years -- a chance to bridge the gap between aspiration and performance.

Where there are differences -- not so much between the U.N. and the U.S., but between the Hyde Act and the other proposals on offer -- these relate essentially to two points: the method to be used to make reform happen, and the global context which makes U.N. reform so important.

For Mr. Hyde and his colleagues, reform can only be brought about by threatening a draconian and unilateral cut in the U.S. contribution to the U.N. budget.

I believe that approach is profoundly mistaken and would, if adopted by the U.S. government as a whole, prove disastrously counterproductive. It would break the reformist coalition between the U.S. and other member-states whose collective pressure could otherwise make these reforms happen.

The U.N. is an association of sovereign states, which agreed, when they ratified the Charter, to share the expenses of the Organization "as apportioned by the General Assembly." The scale of assessment, which determines the share borne by each member-state, is renegotiated every six years; and every year the General Assembly passes a resolution -- invariably supported by the U.S. -- enjoining all members to pay their contributions promptly, in full and without conditions.

The way to make changes or reforms, therefore, is to negotiate agreement with other member-states.

As the Gingrich-Mitchell task force put it, "to be successful, American diplomacy must build a strong coalition including key member-states from various regions and groups . . . Many of whom share America's strong desire to reform the United Nations into an organization that works." Such a coalition will not be built by one nation threatening to cut its own contribution unilaterally. Other states will not accept such a "big stick" approach.

Fortunately, the Hyde withholding proposal is not backed by the administration, or indeed by the task force.

Even more important, however, is the global context. The U.N. does not exist in a vacuum, or for its own sake. It is a forum in which all the world's peoples can come together to find common solutions to their common problems -- and, when they so choose, also an instrument with which to pursue those solutions.

There are surely more shared global problems and threats today, or anyway not fewer, than when the U.N. was founded.

Among the most worrying are the proliferation of terrorist groups and weapons of mass destruction, and the danger that the latter will fall into the hands of the former.

Those are very serious threats to people in rich and poor countries alike. The failure of last month's review conference on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to address them seems breathtakingly irresponsible. I hope the world's political leaders will now take up the issue, with much greater urgency.

To deal with such issues, we need, among other things, a stronger and more representative Security Council.

But the threats that seem most immediate to many people in poor countries are those of poverty, disease, environmental degradation, bad government, civil conflict, and in some cases -- Darfur inevitably springs to mind -- the use of rape, pillage and mass murder to drive whole populations from their homes.

We can only make progress if we address all these threats at once. No nation can reasonably expect cooperation on the things that matter to it most, unless it is prepared in return to help others with their priorities. And, as the U.N.'s own high-level reform panel pointed out, the different kinds of threats are closely interconnected. Neglect and misgovernment in Afghanistan allowed terrorists to find a haven. Chaos in Haiti caused attempted mass migration to Florida. And poor health systems in poor countries may make it easier for a disease like avian flu to spread spontaneously, or even to be spread deliberately, from one continent to another.

So development and security are connected -- and both in turn are linked to human rights and the rule of law. The main purpose of my "In Larger Freedom" report was to suggest things that can and should be done, by all nations working together, to achieve progress on all these fronts and to make the U.N. a more effective instrument for doing so.

Decisions can be taken this September, when political leaders from all over the world meet at U.N. Headquarters for the 2005 world summit. Over 170 have said they will come, and President Bush is expected to be among them.

The stakes for the U.S., and for the world, could hardly be higher. The opportunity to forge a common response to common threats may not soon recur. It is in that context, and for that reason, that a reformed and strengthened U.N. is so badly needed.

Kofi A. Annan is the Secretary-General of the United Nations