

THE UN OLD BOYS' LAST HURRAH?

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The fifth UN management reform attempt begins

For six decades, the "old boy" senior officials of the UN Secretariat have enjoyed a very nice game. Over and over again, as detailed in the five-page chronology of reform events which opens this archive's subsection on [Management Systems](#), the General Assembly has repeatedly called for more transparent, analytical and results-oriented processes to build Secretariat managerial accountability.

The Secretariat leadership, when thus pressed, responds with many ringing statements of good intentions and many activities leading ever so slowly toward the reforms called for. After a few years, however, the efforts dwindle away without serious implementation of the reforms ever having taken place. After a lull, the General Assembly bestirs itself and demands reform action, and the cycle begins all over again.

In 2004 and 2005, however, the situation seems to have drastically changed, as multiple allegations, scandals, and -- especially -- critical reports have highlighted grave UN Secretariat mismanagement, on a scale never before encountered. Two introductory quotes (many others follow in the next three subsections) give the tenor of these criticisms, one on the mounting scandals, the other on the UN management culture crisis:

"The United Nations, which extols the virtues of 'good governance', is not practising what it preaches, say [many long-time observers.] ...

The complaints ... come amidst several recent scandals, including accusations of bribery, nepotism, sexual harassment, and mismanagement of peacekeeping operations overseas.

"The underlying problem is a lack of transparency and accountability" says Hillel Neuer, [one close observer.] ..

... in 2003 the OIOS cleared the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime in Vienna of charges of corruption and mismanagement.

... Senior U.N. officials in New York [have reportedly routinely abused] their first class or business class airline privileges ...

[Neuer said] 'if some of the things that happen at the United Nations took place in a big corporation, people would have been fired.'

[A UN shortcoming, Neuer added, is that the investigation results emerge very slowly] ... are mostly 'white-washed' ... [and occur] only after 'a lot of prodding from the media and NGOs.'

[A reporter asked spokesman Fred Eckhard if there is] 'a record that shows that the United Nations, under Kofi Annan, has taken allegations of mismanagement and misbehaviour seriously and fired people as a result?'

[Eckhard replied] ... 'I will certainly ask for you ...'

Thalif Deen, "Corruption: U.N. failing to practice 'good governance', IPS Inter Press Service, **December 9, 2004**.

[Note: No such record seems to exist, but it definitely should, as a clear measure to confirm that the UN indeed takes accountability seriously.]

"[The UN integrity survey] is of course just one of the UN's various investigations into itself. ...

Does anyone see a problem here?

The basic flaws are simple. Any time you create a large institution, accord it great privileges of secrecy, give it a big budget and have it run immune from any sane standard of accountability, you are likely to get a corrupt organization. ...

The problem with the Secretariat isn't "tone" at the top. It's accountability at the top and secrecy throughout. ...

Someone needs to help this institution, and it's not a consulting team hired by the same institution, nor is it a batch of investigators operating under terms defined by the U.N, nor is it a grand gathering of staff members being urged to risk reprisals by telling tales of earlier reprisals.

A better place to start is to ... withhold part of the U.N.'s budget ... [or] tackle the system that engendered Oil-for-Food ... For now, I'm [starting to believe] that in ... reforming the UN, the only thing worse than having the U.N. ignore a problem is to have the U.N. investigate it."

Claudia Rosett, "The problem with the Secretariat", The Wall Street Journal, **June 16, 2004**.

There is increasing agreement by all concerned that something drastic must be done, and that -- this time -- management reforms must succeed. In March 2005, Secretary-General Annan, who had taken an increasing buffeting in the global media, rushed to the front of the parade. He stated that:

"Today I shall be presenting my report, "In Larger Freedom" to the United Nations General Assembly. ...

I wanted to remind the governments of the world, who put me in my job and to whom I am accountable, that they are in the UN to represent not themselves but their peoples, who expect them to work for the [UN Charter's] ... aims

These aims can be summarized as peace, human rights, justice and development ...

Of course, the UN often falls far short of these noble aspirations, since it reflects the realities of world politics ...

The UN ... can be a much more effective instrument **if its governing body, the General Assembly**, is better organized and gives clearer directives to us in the secretariat, with the flexibility to carry them out, and **holds us clearly accountable for how we do it**. ...

I shall today propose decisions in all ... areas, and challenge world leaders to respond with action at the UN summit in September. ...

... **If world leaders rise to their responsibilities**, the rebirth and **renewal of the UN will be just beginning** - and with it, renewed hope for a freer, fairer, and safer world."

Kofi Annan, "An aspiration to a larger freedom", Financial Times (UK), **March 21, 2005**. [emphasis added.]

Even Mr. Annan's supporting proposals were short on details of management reform (particularly on exactly how the ringing declaration that the General Assembly must hold the Secretariat clearly accountable should be implemented.) But the need for such reforms has long been clear and pressing. The home page of this IO Watch website presents two wise warnings about pragmatic oversight of UN operations, which may now finally begin to get the fundamental emphasis that they deserve:

"Conventionally 'internationalist' administrations ... are too inclined to see the IMF and the World Bank as ends in themselves, as signs of enlightenment and virtue, however much a mess they make of things.

It is quite right to ask ... whether these bodies need to exist at all, exactly what purpose they are intended to serve, and just how well they are discharging their duties, whatever they may be."

"Reforming the Sisters", The Economist, **February 17th, 2001**, pp. 20-21.

[Note: As the most astute chronicler of UN successes and problems over the years, *The Economist* would surely extend this wise advice to the UN as well.]

"It is precisely those committed to struggling for a better world who stand most in need of abandoning the fantasy of an idealized international system."

David Rieff, "Goodbye, new world order", Mother Jones, **July/August 2003**, pp. 37-41.

It is also interesting to consider three opinions about UN performance, which were buried deep within a comprehensive book on international politics in 2001. They were provided by a cautious optimist, a determined reformist, and a pragmatic skeptic. It seems, in light of all the UN management crisis events of 2004 and 2005, that the balance of these assessments has now shifted quite noticeably away from the center of the

second quote, and much closer to the content of the third than the first.

"In the many conflicts and crises of the post-1945 era the UN's record has been mixed. ... Despite its many weaknesses and perennial financial crises, the UN has become the first genuinely global international organization, bringing almost all sovereign states under one set of principles."

Adam Roberts, pp. 868, 874,

"Despite a less than perfect record ... the UN has served an irreplaceable function.

A robust United Nations ... has great potential to address the complex problems of today's world. Translating that potential into reality, however, means that the deficiencies of the UN system must be remedied. ...

Enhancing the capacity of the United Nations ... also means finding a new way of structuring the Organization to increase its effectiveness and make it more accountable."

Lloyd Axworthy, pp. 868-869,

"The United Nations is a deeply flawed institution that has, nonetheless, served foreign policy interests from time to time. ...

The most likely future role for the UN will be an approximate continuation of its muddled, incoherent, and marginally important present status. ...

Any international organization that purports to assert governmental power, even indirectly, and certainly one that embodies no indicia of democratic accountability, is automatically (and properly) viewed as suspect. ...

[Its history] unambiguously demonstrates that the UN is a forum for the conflict of national interest, not a place of worship for what some believe are humanity's higher ideals."

John R. Bolton, p. 871.

All three of the above articles are in

Joel Krieger, ed., "United Nations", The Oxford companion to politics of the world, Oxford, London, 2001, pp. 865-874

This section of the IO Watch archive explores in some detail the mounting analyses and criticisms of UN operations and management in 2004 from many authoritative sources; the further "sea of troubles" that emerged in early 2005 and the halting efforts of the UN leadership to "take arms ... and by opposing [hopefully] end them"; and some reflections from the "real world" to try to put this new UN management crisis into longer-term perspective.

IO Watch will continue to report on the situation as new developments emerge, both in the run up to the "grand reform" deliberations at the 60th session of the General Assembly in the autumn of 2005, and subsequently.

Meanwhile, 2005 has also uncovered a very pragmatic new approach to drifting global development efforts. It has a very direct and relevant message for actions by the purported

"masters", the Member States, to finally take action to correct a faltering UN Secretariat as well.

"The new ... [American foreign aid program, the Millennium Challenge Account, draws on World Bank arguments which command] a broad consensus: aid may do some good even in basket cases, but it certainly works better in countries with honest governments and sound policies. ...

The MCA is based on ... 16 different indicators of a country's honesty and soundness ...

A [donor] ... picky about which countries it helps need not be as fastidious about how its money is spent ... demanding only new ideas and measurable results. ... Britain's aid ministry ... is careful about which governments it supports, but quite laissez-faire about how its money is used. ...

Giving aid in a systematically selective way ... maximises the return to the aid that is given. But it also encourages governments to reform so as to qualify for aid in the future. This second effect might be most powerful in countries denied money.

The success of the MCA will be measured not by the number of dollars it hands out, but by the changes it brings about in the countries that it supports. Sometimes in the aid industry, withholding money can be as important as bestowing it."

"Economics focus: A choosier approach to aid", The Economist, April 23d, 2005, p. 77. REV 2e, JCOL - 882 - 12

The above "selective funding" principles certainly can and should be applied as well to the United Nations and its many, incredibly scattered programmes and initiatives, especially since much of the UN's \$6 to \$10 billion of annual expenditures now comes through voluntary funding.

As discussed in the concluding section of this archive on [Answers: A Starting Point](#) and [Geneva group 'due diligence' failure](#), if UN Member States insist firmly and consistently on UN accountability through demonstrated results and transparency for funds provided, it would not only improve recent weak UN management performance, but greatly expand the value of UN funding provided. The benefits would accrue both to the taxpayers of major donor countries who pay the bills, and even more to the people worldwide whose very lives may well depend in part on prompt and effective UN services.

The following abbreviations of major UN organizations and entities appear throughout this archive:

ACABQ	Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions
ACC	Advisory Committee on Coordination (heads of UN system agencies, recently retitled "Chief Executives Board for Coordination")
Board of Auditors	of the United Nations
CPC	Committee for Programme & Coordination
DAM	Department of Administration and Management (recently retitled the

DPI	Department of Management, DM)
DPKO	Department of Public Information
ECOSOC	Department of Peace-keeping Operations
Fifth Committee	Economic and Social Council
ICSC	(Administrative and Budgetary) of the General Assembly
JIU	International Civil Service Commission
OIOS	Joint Inspection Unit
OHRM	Office of Internal Oversight Services
UNCTAD	Office of Human Resources Management
UNHCR	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNEP	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNFPA	United Nations Environment Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Population Fund
UNDP	United Nations Children's Fund
UNRWA	United Nations Development Programme
	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
WFP	World Food Programme