

HUMANITARIAN

Introductory quotes

"It wasn't only that UN officials refused to take any initiative in Somalia. Far worse, they even declined to act when asked [in July 1991].

Why was the UN so loath to act, to play the mediating, peacekeeping role for which it was established? The answer is institutional, bureaucratic caution, and personal ambition ... UN officials were reluctant to try for fear of being associated with failure. ...

Slowly, as international attention began to focus on Somalia, UN agencies did begin to return. But still there was little progress ... until Boutros-Ghali appointed Mohammed Sahnoun as his special envoy in April 1992. Sahnoun had been ... an Algerian Ambassador and deputy secretary general of the Organization of African Unity. He was a brilliant choice. ...

Sahnoun worked hard to overcome the negative feelings that the Somali people had toward the UN. He began by listening ... By talking to everybody

Just as important, Sahnoun won the admiration and cooperation of the international relief organizations. Unlike prior UN workers, he lived in Mogadishu, enduring the heat, mosquitoes, filth, lack of water, electricity, and basic comforts. [Said Geoffrey Loane of the Red Cross], "And he worked like hell. He worked seven days a week, constantly. He inspired all of us.'

Sahnoun was succeeding ... where others had failed. But what really concerned UN officials was that Sahnoun spoke publicly about the failures of the UN. Believing his criticism would make people aware of the UN's mistakes and save lives by preventing UN officials from making them again, Sahnoun did not flinch from expressing his views.

At a UN conference in Geneva on October 12, 1992, Sahnoun was direct. 'A whole year slipped by whilst the UN and the international community, save for the International Red Cross and a few nongovernmental humanitarian organizations, watched Somalia descend into this hell. The damage will not be repaired.' During this period '300,000 Somalis, mostly children, have succumbed, some of them in agony' he said.

Almost from the outset, Sahnoun got into trouble for acknowledging the UN's mistakes.

[On October 19] Boutros-Ghali sent Sahnoun a letter ordering him to refrain from public criticism of the UN. Such comments were 'deeply damaging to the organization's reputation.' [He then] quickly appointed a successor, Ismat Kittani, a man experienced in UN 'corridor politics' as well as international diplomacy.

Although humanitarian organizations generally stay as far away from politics as they can, several of those working in Somalia issued a statement stating that 'For the first time we felt that the UN had provided the informed leadership we demanded many months ago. ... [Sahnoun's] removal at this critical time jeopardizes relief efforts ... His outspoken criticism of the UN's response in Somalia has, we believe, resulted in him being sacrificed by the UN bureaucracy at the expense of the humanitarian relief effort.'

At the October conference on Somalia, Sahnoun had said 'It should be the duty of the UN to look back and seriously investigate the reasons for our failure to act promptly. Because the important question is, how can we in the future avert similar tragedies?'

If, in the future, the UN hopes to avoid failures like that in Somalia, it will need to change on a more fundamental level.

Above all, if the UN is to be effective, it must be accountable. 'The UN is probably the least accountable bureaucracy in the world -- a main reason not only for the cataclysm in Somalia but for the persistence of famine through Africa', said Alex de Waal, a British anthropologist who has studied the UN's response to famines. 'Officials who are responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths must face the prospect of prosecution, not promotion.'

There is also the need for a freedom of information act, so UN officials cannot hide from the public everything from their salaries to their mistakes to how much they're spending on public relations. And finally, there must be an independent watchdog organization with full power to investigate U.N. agencies.

The General Assembly has the authority to establish a commission of inquiry to examine what went wrong in Somalia, but it has never examined its own performance."

Ray Bonner, "Why we went": How the United Nations turned its back on Somalia and subverted the best chance for peace", Mother Jones, (USA), **March-April 1993**, pp. 54-60.

[Note: the full article is available at <http://www.mojones.com/> under the author's name and Mother Jones MA93: Why we went .]

"Just a month after the United Nations released a self-incriminating report on the massacre in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, an equally damning report has appeared on Rwanda. During 100 days in 1994, a staggering 800,000 civilians were slaughtered in this small Central African state. The United Nations had 2,500 troops in the area in early 1994. All but a few hundred were withdrawn when the killing started.

Given its membership, the United Nations will never meet all of the world's many humanitarian challenges. But it should at least avoid empty efforts that serve to excuse the world's inaction.

If the world's leading governments are indifferent to genocide, the United Nations should not act as the vehicle for token interventions to hide their shame. It should use that shame to fight indifference; it should broadcast the horror of genocide to voters and stir the outrage that might produce serious intervention. [Secretary-General Kofi] Annan likes to say that the United Nations should not be neutral in the face of evil. Indifference to evil is not a matter for polite neutrality, either."

"Confession on Rwanda", *The Washington Post*, International Herald Tribune, **December 21, 1999**.

Chronological quotes

"In ... international humanitarian efforts, United Nations relief undertakings -- greatly expanded in the nineteen-seventies, as the victims of prolonged conflicts and natural disasters multiplied --- were gratuitously obstructed by the U.N. pattern of subservience to governmental pressures, of administrative havoc, and of feuds nurtured within U.N. agencies themselves. While the public was encouraged to regard ...[a UN relief mission] as a concerted endeavor by the organization, devoted workers in the field were repeatedly frustrated in essential tasks by the confusion and politicization of a top-heavy headquarters bureaucracy. Nothing in the United Nations' attitudes and structure had prepared the system to respond with coordinated intelligence to an unprecedented volume of calamities -- which were associated, in Asia, with the dispersal of

entire peoples and societies. Nor were correctives rationally applied..."

Shirley Hazzard, "Breaking Faith: II", The New Yorker, **October 2, 1989**, pp. 74-96, [76-77].

Note: Ms. Hazzard worked at the UN for ten years, resigning in 1962 to become a very successful full-time writer.]

"For an example of a troubled agency, take the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. In 1986 Mr. Jean-Pierre Hocké was elected to head it ... a Swiss, [and former] operational director of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Staff at UNHCR were soon grumbling. At first, outsiders put this down to Mr. Hocké's heavy-handed Swiss manner. And he did some brave things

But the grumbling went on. [In October 1989] four dissidents sent a dossier to a Swiss television station. It was not very dreadful. The worst thing ... was that he had insisted on traveling on traveling on first class when that was banned

Behind this, though, lay other grumblings. Mr. Hocké owed his election to the votes of African countries. He later created a new division ... and put in charge Mr. Antoine Noel ... from Africa. [Some staff felt] that while Mr. Hocké did not always consult others appropriately, he was notably ready to talk to Mr. Noel before doing anything major. The result was a demoralized staff, and the loss of confidence in the agency among the rich countries which finance it that left it facing an \$80 million deficit on its operations. Mr. Hocké departed."

"The United Nations agencies: A case for emergency treatment", The Economist, **December 2, 1989**, pp. 27-28, 30 [28].

"[Two years after the United Nations launched a drive .. to raise funds for clearing land mines inside Afghanistan, a UN official has charged that money, including about \$10 million donated by the U.S. government, is being wasted.

Rae McGrath, a land mines specialist who spent 18 years in the British army before joining the UN ... program as its field supervisor, said that the United Nations had grossly exaggerated the impact of its program, in part to raise money ...

He added that large sums had been wasted on poorly planned and badly monitored educational programs for refugees. "We're not running a mine eradication program, which is what the donors are giving the money for and what needs to be done" Mr. McGrath said.

After a dispute with his superiors ... [he] is leaving the United Nations. Others associated with the program ... said they agreed with the thrust of Mr. McGrath's criticisms." In its solicitations for funds, the United Nations says it has trained 20,000 Afghans in mine awareness and mine clearance. But it has sent only one team of 27 into Afghanistan to clear mines."

Steve Coll, "Afghan funds wasted, UN official says", Washington Post Service, International Herald Tribune, **22 March 1990**.

"The United Nations is losing an estimated £270 m. each year because of corruption, waste and mismanagement, an investigation by the *Sunday Times* Insight team has discovered.

The new evidence of widespread financial abuse ... comes [from] ... 'Operation Irma', the trouble-ridden evacuation of wounded refugees from Bosnia.

The disclosures will fuel growing international criticism of the U.N. and its controversial refugee agency [the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees], accused of incompetence and red tape. ...

An estimated £1 m. has been raised in one week in public donations, but aid agencies are bitter and angry that hundreds of times that amount of cash has been squandered by the U.N. so far this year.

Jeffrey Clark, deputy director of the Refugee Policy Group, an international agency helping refugees in Bosnia, said: 'At the very moment when the U.N. needs to persuade people and governments to spend more on expanded operations its credibility is undermined by waste, mismanagement, ineptitude, and pure stupidity.'

Nick Rufford, Ian Burrell and David Leppard, "Scandal of U.N. 'lost' millions", The Sunday Times, **15 August 1993**, p. 1.

[The above are only a few of the comments on UNHCR among those excerpted in the UN Special (Geneva), October, 1993, pp. 20, 22, 27.]

"On the very day the Sunday Times published [the above] report, I received the news of the killing of one more UNHCR colleague, Boris Zeravcic, in Bosnia. The report failed to mention the sacrifices that the vast majority of the United Nations staff make, particularly the loss of life, while working in conflict situations.

The Staff Council in UNHCR agrees with the thrust of the criticisms. The staff wants to weed out corruption, mismanagement, nepotism, double-dippers, desk-warmers, and all other irregularities ... Staff representatives have been tirelessly pointing out unsavory management tendencies and reported to the governing body of UNHCR ... on how to strengthen the organization and to ensure the effective use of its human resources. The question is: what do these government representatives do with these reports when they return to their capitals ...

UNHCR ... staff on the ground work with dedication and have twice won the Nobel Peace Prize, but they are demoralized when subjected to unjustified criticism. UNHCR staff needs the help of the media to further strengthen its humanitarian commitment to work for refugees."

Nasr Ishak, "HCR staff replies", UN Special (Geneva), **October 1993**, p. 20.

[Note: a reply letter to the Sunday Times, by the Chairman of the Staff Council, UNHCR].

"[Jiri Dienstbier] the special rapporteur of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, [has bluntly declared] that the peacekeeping mission [in Kosovo] has failed 'to achieve a single goal; neither security for people nor freedom of movement, not to mention creating conditions for the develop of democratic institutions in a multiethnic society.' This is a message Western leaders don't want to hear -- and strenuously seek to refute.

Just how bad is the situation on the ground? Crime, gangs, and the heroin trade are all flourishing.

Bernard Kouchner, the head of the U.N. administration in Kosovo, has few resources at his disposal so far.

Today, NATO still insists on the fiction that Kosovo is a multiethnic autonomous province within Yugoslavia.

But it's time to get real Peacekeeping missions are proliferating in remote areas -- East Timor, Sierra Leone, Georgia. 'If we can't turn the situation around in a tiny area with 1.7 million people who are mostly on our side, it's the end of humanitarian interventionism everywhere' argues NATO spokesman Jamie Shea. An overblown prediction, perhaps -- but only a tad, I'd say."

Andrew Nagorski, "The perils of peacekeeping" A year after the NATO air war, the result of NATO's efforts is a highly volatile mess", Newsweek, **April 17, 2000**, p. 2.

" Africa has more than 3 million refugees and some 15 million internally displaced, a much higher number than 10 years ago. These outcasts strain the resources of host communities, and the goodwill of donors, yet there is no end to the stream of people fleeing for their lives.

The United Nations refugee relief agency is weakly managed and needs more oversight -- in part because member nations use it as a patronage pit -- and its dependence on host countries to provide services is another breeding ground for corruption. But the agency is dealing with a dangerous and difficult mission: 24 members of its staff, and 23 workers for the World Food Program, have been killed since 1992. The reluctance of donors has also crippled the agency, which finds it easier to raise money for emergency appeals than to alleviate the chronic miseries of most African refugees."

"Refugee crisis in Africa", *The New York Times*, in the International Herald Tribune, **June 17, 2000**.

"The highest-ranking UN official responsible for refugees plans to retire at the end of the year, and a race is on to find a replacement within the next month or two.

Several candidates seem willing to take the job, even though it is being redefined by an era of civil wars whose combatants have often turned their guns on aid workers.

With more than 30 million people driven from their homes and needing help in Europe, Africa and Asia, the job of the UN high commissioner for refugees has become one of the world's most difficult.

For almost a decade -- through conflicts from Bosnia to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to East Timor -- the job has been held by Sadako Ogata of Japan.

Secretary-General Kofi Annan will choose Mrs. Ogata's replacement after he consults with various governments. The General Assembly will then consider his choice.

UN officials and diplomats said Mr. Annan hoped to have a candidate by early October but was still seeking nominees.

Although there is no formal list of candidates, half a dozen people are considered serious contenders. "

Barbara Crossette, "UN weighs nominees for refugee post", International Herald Tribune, **August 14, 2000**.

"The world cannot continue to tolerate the slaughter of innocent civilians in the state of Darfur, western Sudan, or the duplicitous acts of the Sudanese government that let the perpetrators turn their backs on justice and saunter away. Arab militias, called the Janjaweed, are being used to terrorize groups of African origin ...

The UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, has called for a humanitarian cease-fire in Darfur and has warned that outside military action may be needed to protect civilians and ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Indeed, in light of escalating violence in Darfur and a deteriorating humanitarian situation, immediate intervention by the international community is required. Ten years ago, we failed to act [promptly] ... in Rwanda, and the consequences were horrendous. Preventive intervention now may keep a similar tragedy from befalling Darfur.

... according to the UN ..., the Sudanese government has supported indiscriminate killings of civilians, gang rapes, looting of private property and humanitarian aid, burning of villages, abductions, forced migration and general intimidations. [A US official says that Darfur has become] 'one of the worst humanitarian crises in Africa.'

America and the international community need to act quickly ..."

Tom Lantos, "Ethnic cleansing in Darfur: Time to get tough with Sudan," International Herald Tribune, **May 6, 2004**.

"How bad does a crisis have to get? Relief groups have tried for months to avert a disaster in the western Sudanese region of Darfur, but hardly anyone has listened. Most aid donors don't do much until they're shocked into it by graphic images of hollow-eyed infants -- and

by then, the victims whose pictures they're seeing may be permanently damaged, if not dead.

Refugees ... cling to life, huddled in makeshift camps ... Diseases like cholera, meningitis and now polio pose a threat more imminent than starvation ... The hope now is to keep a dire situation from getting worse. 'If we get relief in, we could lose a third of a million' said [a senior US aid official] in early June. 'If we do not, it could be a million.'

Tom Masland, "Living and the dead: Famine images mean it's already too late for thousands", Newsweek International, **July 5, 2004**, pp. 36-39.

"In the last few years, expatriate and local staff working for ... [the UN and NGOs] have been murdered in ... failed or failing states, [which] are the most dangerous places on earth. Donors [such as the EU, UN agencies, and others] ... have a moral obligation to ensure that humanitarian work is not being done at the expense of innocent lives. The people who run aid agencies should not allow their idealism or need for visibility and funds to compromise the safety of their staff.

[A code of conduct for humanitarian aid], states that 'when we give humanitarian aid it is not a partisan or political act and should not be viewed as such.'

That was then, this is now, when the lines of humanitarian and military action are blurred.

...

The code of conduct needs to be radically overhauled with the involvement of governments ...to speak to the obligations of warring parties to respect humanitarian workers, and it must obligate aid agencies to exercise due diligence in the deployment of qualified staff in conflict areas, and to desist from doing so if they cannot ensure their safety."

Denis McClean, "Hostages in Iraq: Aid agencies shouldn't take unnecessary risks", International Herald Tribune, **September 14, 2004**. [emphasis added]

[Note: Mr. McClean is a journalist for the Irish Times who worked for 14 years with the International Federation of the Red Cross in Africa, the Americas, and Asia.]

"[Secretary-General] Kofi Annan ... has launched an all-out campaign to rebuild the UN's dysfunctional security system, prompting a debate that could determine the organisation's capacity to operate in dangerous countries for years to come.

Over the coming days, UN budget experts will discuss a \$97 million ... appeal for a fundamental [security] overhaul ... to be paid from the UN's core budget.

'The United Nations today faces a security environment of unprecedented risk', Mr. Annan told the budget committee ...

... Political questions could prove [very] important. ...

Developed countries are seeking new ways to deal with [threats of terrorism] ... and some are pushing for the right of preemptive action as well as 'humanitarian intervention' in countries that do not protect their civilians.

... Developing countries are demanding a renewed focus on poverty. Many analysts think any reform will entail a 'grand bargain' between 'northern' security concerns and 'southern' financial worries.

... According to one official, the simple fact was that the UN could no longer fulfil its mandate in development without security. This, said the official, led to a simple decision: 'They've got to make up their minds whether they want to send us there or not.'

Mark Turner, "Annan launches drive to boost UN security", Financial Times (UK), **November 4, 2004**.

"The apparent murder in Iraq of Margaret Hassan, head of CARE International in Baghdad ... underlines the fact that aid work is one of the most dangerous professions in the

world. ...

In the past decade, more than 200 of the United Nations' civilian staff have been killed by 'malicious acts' in 45 countries ... [and] hundreds of other unarmed aid workers have been killed, maimed, abducted and assaulted as they have tried to help people in some of the world's most benighted places.

Humanitarian outfits have long been used to being caught in the crossfire. What is new is the deliberate way they are now being targeted, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. ...

Until the early 1990s, the UN's blue flag and the ICRC's red cross almost guaranteed protection against attack. No longer. ...

As a result, say the aid people, the neutral 'humanitarian space' in which they seek to operate has drastically shrunk. They are now regarded as semi-official distributors of western government relief [aid] ...

The United Nations 'cannot succumb to a bunker mentality' says Kofi Annan ...

Brave words. But will they prove any more effective against targeted attacks than the blue flag?"

"Aid agencies: More dangerous work than ever", The Economist, **November 20th, 2004**, pp. 42-43.

"More than 31,000 people are continuing to die every month as a result of the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, more than 18 months after the signing of a peace agreement ...

The New York-based International Rescue Committee (IRC) said its mortality survey, conducted jointly with Burnet Institute of Australia, a medical research body, was one of the most comprehensive ever conducted in a conflict zone.

It put the total of war-related deaths over the past six years at 3.8 [million], [which makes] it the world's deadliest conflict since the second world war. ...

... The report said continuing insecurity in the eastern provinces of the country was impeding civilians' access to humanitarian aid. ...

The survey showed that 98 per cent of recent deaths attributable to the conflict were the result of preventable diseases and malnutrition.

Nearly half the excess deaths since last year were of children under five, the IRC said ...

Despite the continuing impact, it said foreign aid to Congo this year amounted to just \$3.23 ... per person, compared with \$89 in Sudan's Darfur region and \$178 in Iraq."

David White, "Over 31,000 a month 'are dying in Congo war'", The Financial Times (UK), **December 9, 2004**.

"The [December 2004 tsunami disaster] is proving to have many unintended political consequences, not least its impact on the United Nations. Isolated diplomatically over Iraq, beset with financial and sexual scandals and manifestly failing to halt genocide in Sudan, the UN must prove its mettle in dealing with the humanitarian crisis in South-east Asia or face a threat to its very existence. ...

... Last month, Kofi Annan, the beleaguered secretary general, hosted a secret meeting of his supporters with the aim 'to save Kofi and rescue the UN.' ...

[After] the end of the Cold War ... the UN ... idea of being a world policeman ... fell apart once again. ...

That should have left the autonomous UN agencies -- tasked with everything from feeding refugees to protecting world heritage sites -- to get on with their unglamorous but invaluable role. ...

The best solution [to the UN's current problems] is a new secretary general ... perhaps a former prime minister or president ... It might also be more efficient, in the light of the tsunami

experience, to hive off the UN's overlapping civil emergency organizations ... [and merge them] into a single international rescue agency ..."

George Kerevan, "Has impotent UN finally outlived its usefulness?", The Scotsman, 5 January 2005.

"Kofi Annan, the UN secretary-General, has two problems -- the Bush administration's continuing annoyance with the United Nations and the organization's actual, pressing problems in fulfilling its key missions.

So, Annan is doing the right thing by planning further management changes ... Major shakeups are needed in critical areas like peacekeeping and refugee assistance.

Sweeping changes are also needed at the UN refugee agency that is responsible for protecting the interests of 17 million people worldwide who have been forced from their homes by armed conflict or fear of persecution. Not only has the current high commissioner, Ruud Lubbers, performed uninspiringly, but his relations with his staff have been embittered by a charge of sexual harassment. Although an internal UN investigation found some basis for these claims, the complainant withdrew formal charges and Lubbers says he intends to finish his term, which ends in December. He should be asked to leave now. ...

Given the unremitting hostility of the Bush administration, the survival of the United Nations as an effective organization cannot be taken for granted. Annan will have to challenge the self-protective bureaucracy more radically than it has ever been challenged."

"Housecleaning at the UN", International Herald Tribune, January 12, 2005.

Note: This subsection, and the other five "UN performance problems" subsections that precede "Anecdotes and Observations", are very much still in the "start-up" stage, due to the priority need to establish all the parts of this archive. Material from the sources cited in the "useful sources" for each of them, and other material, will be added as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, this archive's subsection on UN coordination of tsunami aid? highlights an incisive analysis by Rosemary Righter of a quarter-century of very unsatisfactory UN performance in its key role of coordinating humanitarian assistance. The subsection then explores, and will continue to explore, the major UN effort underway in 2005 to "get it right this time", in the wake of the tsunami disaster of 2004 and the associated international relief and reconstruction efforts.

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(Note: informally assembled by IO Watch, roughly ranked from "most useful" on down, and subject to change as new sources are added)

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