

# ANECDOTES AND OBSERVATIONS II

**O**ur people "Are any of our people involved?"

Comment of an African diplomat in New York when requested to consider a management performance scandal in a UN unit in **the early 1980s**. There was a choice of two possible reactions: (a) if "their people" were involved and in trouble, he would do all possible to protect them; (b) if they (and the region's interests) were not involved, he didn't much care about the troubled programme. Many diplomats, from all geographic regions, react in this way to UN Secretariat management problems, which of course greatly hinders any programme improvements.

**P**aper flow "[In response to] recommendations to cut down the enormous volume of documentation ...in 1985, [for] ... roughly 44 million individual documents ... the [Administration stated] a printing cost of one cent per page ...and distribution costs of 8.6 cents per document. The U.S. U.N. Ambassador Joseph Reed, now a U.N. Under-Secretary General, [disagreed, telling] the Second Committee that the cost of writing, translating, and producing a 25,000 page sampling of committee documents was an astronomical \$650 per page, or \$16 million."

"The United Nations continues to duck needed reforms", The Heritage Foundation, Backgrounder, No. 593, Washington, D.C., **July 9, 1987**, pp. 7, 8.

**P**arking difficulties "Why driving down First Avenue is hell: Estimated amount of unpaid New York city parking tickets by U.N. diplomats in 1994 was \$10 million."

"United Nations: Prizes and parking tickets", Newsweek, **October 30, 1995**, p. 21.

**P**layboys and good-timers "I've long advocated that UN headquarters be moved from New York and relocated near the eye of the world's storms of war, famine, poverty, disease, and misgovernment. This would eliminate the playboys and good-timers from UN delegations and the secretariat and attract the honest and serious-minded, perhaps even a few idealists. But until that time comes, we must ensure the UN does not get handed missions it has no chance of carrying out successfully. It can talk shop, yes. No harm in that. But take action, no."

Paul Johnson, "The UN is for talk, not actions," Forbes (US), **March 14, 2005**.

[Note: Mr. Johnson is an "eminent British historian and author."]

**P**oison "Many [UN] diplomats and commentators counsel patience ... [during the early days of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's leadership]. ... Many delegates also say they want to purge the poison that had come to permeate the UN since the fall-out over the Iraq war, corruption scandals and deep splits among the rich and poor worlds over its priorities."

Mark Turner, "Ban's month of muddle: How the new UN chief is struggling to win over the doubters", The Financial Times (UK), **February 1, 2007**.

**P**oop "[At the UN military situation center in New York] Bill Clinton paused to admire a poster-size photograph ... a striking shot that showed [a UN peace keeper in his blue beret] looking protectively at a little bird that had alighted on the back of his hand. But ... the bird had unceremoniously relieved itself. 'No good deed goes unpunished' the president cracked. The 'pooping-bird picture', as it is called by the military officers [in the situation center] has become the new metaphor for peace-keeping operations."

Jeff Sallot, "The blue berets' battle fatigue", The Globe and Mail, Toronto, **October 8, 1994**, as republished in "The UN at 50: Midlife crisis", World Press Review, June 1995, p. 11.

**P**ower struggle, the fundamental UN fault lines "The United Nations was bracing itself [yesterday] for a potentially major budget crisis, after the developing world rejected entreaties by rich countries and the UN secretariat, and was expected to press ahead with a resolution many fear could sink efforts to reform the organization. ... At the heart of the showdown lay a power struggle for control of the UN, between developing nations, which constitute the majority of its membership, the developed world, which pays most of the UN's bills, and the UN Secretariat, which wants more autonomy."

Mark Turner, "UN faces budget crisis as nations argue over reform", The Financial Times (UK), **April 28, 2006**.

**P**ublic relations, not performance "[The UN Staff Council] deplored what it described as 'a culture of impunity permeating the higher levels of the organization' ... which ... [comes from] the primacy accorded to 'fund-raising' and 'resource mobilization.' ... Sound bites and style over substance become the rule of the game. ... One hopes that this will change... [but only, *inter alia*, by] significantly raising the effectiveness, autonomy and independence of the accountability mechanisms and ethics infrastructures." "A culture of impunity at the United Nations", UNDP Watch, **December 13, 2007**.

**R**efugee abuses "[I arrived in] a U.N.-sponsored refugee camp. ... in Sierra Leone as a legal aid worker in ... 2003, ... one year after ... Kofi Annan issue[d] a ... 'zero-tolerance' policy ... [But] I found abuse of a sexual nature almost every day ... In fact, ... injustices of one kind or another were perpetrated by U.N. missions or their affiliated ... [NGOs] every day in the camps I visited. Corruption was the norm, in particular the embezzlement of food and funds by NGO officials. ... Yet ... the message is: Cover your tracks and the United Nations will obstruct your prosecution.

After [a] 2002 report documented sexual abuse, Annan's steely resolve led to exactly zero criminal prosecutions of U.N. officials for sexual abuse. The United Nations ... needs a housecleaning."

Peter Dennis, "The UN: Preying on the weak", washingtonpost.com, **April 12, 2005**.  
[Note: the abuses continue on.]

**R**ules and Referees "Life is a game with many rules but no referees. One learns how to play it more by watching it than by consulting any book. ... Small wonder, then, that so many play dirty, that so few win, that so many lose."

Joseph Brodsky, in On grief and reason: Essays, as quoted by Daniel Langenkamp, editor-in-chief, introducing a set of Fletcher Forum of World Affairs articles on the evolving architecture of world law, **Summer/Fall 2002**.

**S**candal, what scandal? "I do not expect [the Oil-for-Food programme problems] to derail the reform process', [Secretary-General Annan said] ... 'We are determined to go ahead' ... 'We are taking measures to strengthen our own administration and transparency', he said, adding, 'The Member States,

who themselves are very much aware of how the Oil-for-Food [programme] was set up, how it was managed, how it was organized, I think are much more sanguine about the facts than most other people."

"Oil-for-food allegations will not derail UN reform initiative, Annan says", UN News Service, **13 May 2005**.

**S**ea cruise "[Recently I traveled with 250 others] – holy men, activists, U.N. officials and journalists – on a luxurious Adriatic cruise ... to examine environmental hot spots in the Balkans. Once at sea, we attended plenary sessions. ... In Albania, politicians parked their limousines ... and came aboard to declare their commitment to regional peace and stability. ... The brandy and canapés we were served at ... [a dock reception one evening contrasted the next morning with squatters living near] 20,000 tons of toxic waste. The people know it's dangerous ... [but they say,] "nothing happens." We listened and scribbled in our pads. Then the tour buses took us back to our cruise ship, and we sailed away."

Carla Power, "First person global", Newsweek International, **July 15, 2002**.

**S**ecrecy "[Undersecretary-General Inga-Britt Ahlenius,] head of a U.N. inspection office [the OIOS,] said the world body needed a 'major overhaul' of how it procures \$1.9 billion in goods annually. ... [She was] commenting on the conviction of a former U.N. purchasing official ... [and after] U.S. federal prosecutors have indicted ... four U.N. staff members. ... The 192-member [General Assembly] has delayed new procurement regulations for the past two years. 'I think the secretiveness that is held by this organization serves us poorly', Ahlenius said. ... She said the [UN] ... was not protected enough from 'corrupt vendors' and was 'a victim' of unscrupulous companies."

Evelyn Leopold, "U.N. needs overhaul in procurement, U.N. watchdog says", Reuters, **June 8, 2007**.

**S**how me the money "Blue helmets' reddest faces: When \$3.9 million in cash was stolen from an unlocked filing cabinet in Somalia, 1994."

"United Nations: Prizes and parking tickets", Newsweek, **October 30, 1995**, p. 21.

**S**orry "A local UN employee ... survived what was called the 'march of death' [in Bosnia in the 1990s], trekking for 38 days across Serb-held territory to safety, only to be informed on arrival that he could not now go on holiday since he had just used up his annual entitlement."

From Emir Suljagic, Postcards from the grave, translated by Lejla Haveric, Saqi Books/Bosnian Institute, 2005, as discussed in "Srebrenica: Ten years on: Tales of crime and shame", The Economist, **July 9th, 2005**, p. 68.

**S**top it! "Isn't there *anyone* who can stop these people?"

A young UN secretary in Geneva after several years of observing senior officials do whatever (or however little) they wanted to do "at work", in the **late 1980s**.

**S**urvival "It is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change."

Charles Darwin. What applies to species of course, applies equally well to modern institutions and organizations]

**T**hirst "[Attempts to cut UN costs by, *inter alia*] saving \$100,000 at Headquarters by removing drinking water pitchers from 13 conference rooms [created a stir.] The entire Fifth Committee spent three hours debating this ... proposal. The U.N. Controller [cited] 'the amount of work ... [which] required five U.N. staffers.' A ... delegate reminded the assembly that water fountains were conveniently located in the halls, while still others discussed the symbolic importance of water."

"The United Nations continues to duck needed reforms", The Heritage Foundation, Backgrounder, No. 593, Washington, D.C., **July 9, 1987**, pp. 2, 8.

**T**oo busy "I once worked in a small tropical country where the [World Health Organization] representative, though personable, was the most incompetent man ... I have ever encountered. His office was 50 yards away from the only hospital in the country, but he contrived not to visit it in his two and a half years there."

Anthony Daniels, The Sunday Telegraph (UK), **25 April 1993**.

**T**riple letter score! "They play a lot of Scrabble."

The answer of a young professional, who had been hired with friends from a major Latin American country under the elaborate UN programme of national competitive recruitment examinations in the **late 1980s**, to the question of what some of those friends were doing in New York to fend off boredom in their poorly-structured new jobs.

**T**ruth "... only on a scrutiny of truth can a future of peace be built."

Dag Hammarskjold, to the UN General Assembly, **3 October 1960**, as quoted in Shirley Hazzard, Defeat of an ideal: A study of the self-destruction of the United Nations, Atlantic Monthly-Little Brown, Boston-Toronto, 1973.

**U**GO "It is not a United Nations Organization, but a United Governments Organization."

Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, in his Nobel Prize acceptance address of **1972**, as quoted in Shirley Hazzard, "Breaking Faith: I", The New Yorker, September 25, 1989, p 76.

**U**N resolutions "UN resolutions are like hotdogs. If you know how they make 'em you don't want to eat 'em. You just swallow. No questions asked."

A diplomat explaining how UN General Assembly resolutions are formulated in New York, as quoted in Linda Polman, We did nothing: Why the truth doesn't always come out when the UN goes in, translated by Rob Bland, Viking, New York and London, **2003**, p. vii., [1997, and rev. ed. published in Dutch by Rozenberg, Amsterdam, 2002.]

**U**N- "UNwise, UNprepared, UNtrained, UNable"

Writing on the sides of military trucks in a convoy speeding across a barren landscape, editorial cartoon by Ramirez, Los Angeles Times Syndicate, International Herald Tribune, **June 16, 2000**.

**V**oid at the top "The central basis for democratic legitimacy is the people. ... The [heads of the UN, World Bank, IMF and] other appointed leaders ... [lack the legitimacy of national government leaders,

so] global governance reform cannot be based ... [solely on them.] ... There is no global governance group at the apex of the international system. ... [In] the twenty-first century, ... interconnections among challenges, sectors, and institutions are central. ... [Therefore] the void at the apex is now critical. ... The key requirement is that the new forum be substantially more inclusive, broader in its focus, and based on a new commitment to asserting stewardship of the international system ... If the international system does not ... meet the challenges of the global age, it will fail to have 'practical meaning', and it will falter."

Colin I. Bradford, Jr., and Johannes F. Linn, eds., Global governance reform: Breaking the stalemate, Brookings Institution, 2007, Chapter 9, "Conclusions and implications", pp. 116-131 *passim*.

**W**hat's up? "Is the UN really necessary? Anne Applebaum explores the corridors of the United Nations, and finds a lot of people doing nothing very much"

Title and subtitle of her article in The Spectator (UK), 31 July 1993.

**W**here's the outrage? "Imagine if U.S. troops were accused of sexually exploiting children in impoverished nations ... a U.S. Cabinet Secretary were accused of groping a female subordinate, [but then exonerated] ... by the president .... [an agency head] ... and the president's own offspring stood accused of complicity in [a massive embezzlement racket.] ... [These things happened in the UN this year.] Where's the outrage? ... Why didn't the mainstream ... devote more attention to these scandals? Far from demanding high-level resignations, they are circling the wagons. The U.N.'s friends are doing ... no favors with this knee-jerk defense. ... Most of the U.N.'s 191 member states ... [and] 49,000 employees ... have other priorities. Flawed as it is, the UN does some useful things ... Leaving the U.N. ... is unrealistic. But it will never live up to the grandiose expectations of its starry-eyed supporters, unless they get mad enough to demand real change. So far there's no sign of that happening."

Max Boot, "Why U.N. stays mired in its defects: Start with too-friendly media, apathy and members' entrenched interests", Los Angeles Times, December 9, 2004.

**W**histleblowers' fate at the UN "The United Nations ... has its own ways of dealing with whistle-blowers. Mostly, it fires them. ... Recent whistle-blowers interviewed by the National Journal suffered [the loss of their jobs.] ... The United Nations, [an expert] says, provides staff with fewer rights to defend themselves than 'any other government agency I've encountered, either on the national or the international level."

Corine Hegland, "Whistle-blowing at the United Nations", National Journal (US), March 12, 2005.

**W**hy doesn't peacekeeping work all the time? Governments don't always want the UN to succeed when they refer an issue to it. They want to pass the buck, and as Conor Cruise O'Brien once said, 'Failure is really an essential part of the business of the United Nations', adding that members valued 'its proven capacity to fail and to be seen to fail.'

Ian Williams, United Nations for beginners, Writers and Readers, New York, 1995, p. 117.

**W**ords "Hamlet famously moaned 'words, words, words' when Polonius asked him what he was reading. ...."

The opening citation in Shashi Tharoor, "Don't knock gabfests: Not all UN talk is empty", International Herald Tribune, August 15, 2002.

[Note: Mr. Tharoor was the UN undersecretary-general for communications and public

information.]

**W**orst failure “No failure did more to damage the standing and credibility of United Nations peacekeeping in the 1990s than its reluctance to distinguish victim from aggressor.”

Executive summary of the UN “Brahimi” report of **2000** on reforming UN peacekeeping, as cited in Adam Lebor, “Complicity with evil”, 2006.

**Y**our turn! “The International Monetary Fund has a long-standing reputation for dispensing nasty budgetary medicine to countries in economic distress. Whatever the problem, goes the caricature, well-paid bureaucrats ... [in Washington D.C.] demand that spending be cut. ...

[But now] the IMF finds itself in a big fiscal hole [as its] lending has collapsed in recent years. ... So the fund is downsizing. Some \$100 million is to be saved by getting rid of 380 staff, a reduction of around 15% ... and particularly among managers. ...

For outsiders it is hard to resist a wry smile. The dispensers of fiscal rectitude are finally getting a taste of their own medicine.”

“It’s mostly firing: The IMF downsizes”, The Economist, **February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008**, p. 74.