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Will UN Hope Survive?

.....Maybe my role this evening is to lead a discussion among friends and colleagues. As your leader for this discussion, I hope I can do better than the traffic cops in old Shanghai. In the old days--my old days--we used to say that the Shanghai cops did not direct traffic, they simply confirmed it.

What a timely topic: "Will UN Hope Survive?" Well before November 2nd, Roy Lee asked me what I would be talking about. I came up with this idea, taking off from the title of my book on the UN, The Diplomacy of Hope. With the US elections behind us, this topic has become acutely relevant. It is not just: Will the UN Survive, but will the hope invested in the UN, will that hope survive?

The UN was born in hope, the hope for a new and peaceable world order in the wake of the great hemorrhage, World War II. But now, in this year 2004, even before November 2nd, how much of that hope in fact had survived? I tried to address that question at the very beginning of my book. Here is some of what I wrote in my introduction:

Iraq and terrorists have shown that the UN cannot work. The UN Millennium celebrations, ushering in the twenty-first century, were a sham. After all the talk, it is power that decides. The UN has failed. What we need is the anatomy of failure, not the anatomy of hope.

And then, in my book, I went on to say:

War, cynicism, despair. What kind of despair is this? The poet Nadezhda Mandelstam wrote about despair in her book, Hope Against Hope, on the tragic political entrapment and death of Russia's great poet, her husband Osip Mandelstam. Her name, Nadezhda, means hope. Her suffering is life itself, a

poet's alchemy. How many children these days are named "Hope"?

But what has this to do with the United Nations? Nadezhda was one person against the state. Isn't that precisely our problem? We have codes of behavior, moral codes for individuals, and most people on the whole follow the rules. We have something called a conscience that keeps us on track. But people in groups, in nations, seem to revert to a kind of jungle behavior. Put them all together and what can you expect?

We have touched on a profound and perplexing problem. What is it that determines national behavior? Is there such a thing as national, and hence international, morality? The historical record is pretty bad. Yet along with all the bloodshed, in the last century or so, serious measures and codes have emerged to regulate and mitigate international violence. There is some kind of tenuous group morality. Without it there would be no United Nations.

Looking for some sort of metaphor for the UN, I have suggested that it is the great myth of our times. We make myths to give meaning to our lives. But this metaphor doesn't really fit, does it. Myths come out of the historical experience of a people, myths project their collective unconscious. There is not yet the depth of shared worldwide experience that would yield a global mythology. Computers apart, there is no lingua franca, people don't rise up singing their love of the UN, and the pale UN flag flutters idly and unknown. So what is there to build on? Where is some shared world experience? There is fear and there is hope: These are the twin pillars on which the UN was built. Without hope, there would be no United Nations.

But the old world of fear is slow to die. The UN, in its short life, has survived crisis after crisis. The cold war led to hot peace, if you can call it that. And now the main architect of the UN, the great American eagle, has let fear take over, flying its own course away from the UN.

Speaking to the General Assembly in September 2003, Kofi Annan (Secretary-General)

said:

We have come to a fork in the road. This may be a moment no less decisive than in 1945 itself, when the United Nations was founded.

Now we must decide whether it is possible to continue on the basis agreed then, or whether radical changes are needed. (UN document A/58/PV.7, page 3).

A year later, in September 2004, at the General Assembly, the Secretary-General announced his creation of a High Level Panel on threats to peace and security, and on how the UN should respond to all that. The release of the Panel's report has been shrewdly delayed until after November 2nd, some time this week. I will come back to that later.

Let us take our discussion outside the institutional context of the UN, both historically and globally. Early western attempts to achieve stability, from Westphalia on, rested on balancing power among governing elites. The French revolution and Napoleon brought us to our contemporary world where everyone--yes, everyone--is caught up in our new holy wars, and where war itself is an excrescence of industry and technology. No only war is global, but so is almost everything else. Freud explored civilization and its discontents (we have to be good and we don't like it)--and this is now translated into globalization and its discontents--that word "globalization" has become a sort of catch-all for our fluid state of affairs--economic, social, cultural, demographic, pandemic, and environmental--the global flux that rests on the enormous increase in wealth overall and the revolution in communications, information technology. Wherever you are, you are in one global space and time. Thus war, anarchy, greed, violence and crime are global; and so are humane drives to build, protect, and nourish.

Where does the UN fit in all this? The UN is a formal association of nation states whose theoretical autonomy is enshrined in the UN Charter. But the reality is that no nation, not even the most powerful, can live unto itself. Yet the nation state is what we have, and it is far from transferring its authority to the world. So at the UN we have the anomaly of the diminished

nation state, de facto reluctantly yielding to the global flow of power and resources beyond state control. Kofi Annan has tried to tap into this flow, especially through the UN Global Compact with business and labor; and now with the UN Information Summit. For better or for worse there is an enormous flow of energy out there that the UN has hardly touched.

There is more than one UN, isn't there? There is the UN as "process," to use a buzz word--process being the flow of political power, ideas, commitments, resources. Then there is institutionalized UN, the organizations that facilitate process and turn process into action, doing things. Central to all this is what I call "Mother UN," the Charter UN--the General Assembly, the Security Council and their offspring (the UNDP, UNCTAD on Trade, the Commissions on Rights and Refugees, UNICEF, UNIFEM, the Population Fund, the Environment, Habitat). Beyond all that is what we euphemistically call the UN System, the World Bank and IMF, the Specialized Agencies, also many technical organizations to regulate atomic energy in all its forms, to regulate communications, the air, the sea, the mail and so on; not to mention the many treaty bodies for international covenants. Don't forget the War Crimes Tribunals created by the Security Council; and now at last the ICC, the International Criminal Court. Nor should we forget the several regional organizations. It would take a lot of buckshot to bring down this international network.

But an attack on Mother UN is hard on all her children, and that has to be the focus of our concern today. Where is hope and where is fear?

Writing The Diplomacy of Hope took me across the whole spectrum of UN concerns, its achievements, its failures. It is a rich and complex story, little known or celebrated. A great achievement has been human rights law. Within the overarching UN Charter, and taken together with the Geneva Protocols, humanity has for the first time a universal code of conduct. And with the ICC, this code applies not only to states but also to individuals. Human rights transcend criminal law in that rights are the way to go, they set goals for social and economic development,

standards for the good society.

This is an astonishing expression of hope, isn't it? Hope, yes; but at the same time it defines our despair, it measures our failings. For those who toil in the vineyard, every day confronting the chasm between words and deeds, the UN can be a school for cynics. Hope should inspire, not obscure.

To get some distance from easy talk, at the UN Millennium Summit in the year 2000, Kofi Annan did something different. He proposed, and the Nations approved, specific goals to be reached by 2015. The most radical and all-embracing goal was to cut in half worldwide absolute poverty (defined as surviving on \$1 a day). That goal set the frame for related objectives: security, disarmament, health, education, the vulnerable women and children.

Hope is ambitious, and these are hope goals. By gross measure, poverty reduction will be achieved; but only because of overall growth in China and India--and by no means evenly in those countries, while Africa lags far behind. Interim reports tell us that performance has been uneven, but that there is improvement. For a nuanced assessment, we await Jeffrey Sachs' study, due to come out soon in 2005. While these goals are prescribed as goals for the UN, in fact they are primarily goals for the individual members of the UN.

At the level of principle and ideal, the normative function, the UN has been good. Failure stems from its weak tools for enforcement. The War Crimes Tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and now the ICC, are a historic breakthrough, giving some baby teeth to international law. Indictment and prosecution are international, but arrest and incarceration depend on national cooperation. Although the ICC mandate explicitly begins only where state authority ends, the great superpower USA has spread seeds of sovereign distrust. Iraq may induce another look.

This brings me to the critical issues of peace and security, the latest cliff where the UN is hanging. Why is 2004 any worse? All eyes are on the Security Council. Apart from Korea

(1950) and the Suez crises, the Council was largely sidelined during the Cold War. The USA did not take Vietnam to the Security Council; Saddam Hussein was not blessed in shedding blood in Iran; and the USSR suicide in Afghanistan was not certified by the Council. These were big brutal wars, and the world looked the other way. There was no UN crisis because the UN was not consulted. The UN came in late, to patch things up.

For the US-led invasion of Iraq, two things were different. One was that the UN Security Council was already deeply involved, and refused to go along with the US. After bitter debate, the USA ignored, snubbed the Council. And then, in panic from terrorism (9/11), the US Administration asserted its right to strike perceived threats, suspects, to prevent any possible future attack. As distinct from "prevention," preemptive action as self-defense, when hostilities have begun, would be okay within the UN Charter; but not jumping the gun on your own when you suspect some future threat. You know the story. If the USA could do it, so could everyone. This would mean anarchy. To rub salt into the wound, there was the bombing of the UN mission in Baghdad, killing 19 UN people including the distinguished Sergio de Mello. Iraq is a mess. Can we find any UN hope in Iraq? The only slender hope might be: We told you so.

History dishes up another bitter sup. Iraq was created by the British after the first World War. The Brits encountered fierce resistance and simply bombed and strafed. The world neither knew nor cared. Today norms of behavior and TV make Iraq a world tragedy.

So into the breach jumps Kofi Annan with his distinguished Panel to look at threats and what to do about them. The Panel's report will soon be out. Meantime, I have been privileged to be briefed on what the Panel will say. (I expect that some of you have also been briefed.) There is a UN Press Release that gives the mandate and membership of the Panel; and I have given that to you.

The springboard for the Panel is threats, threats to peace and security, obviously a jump-start from terrorism and Iraq. But Kofi Annan told the Panel to look deep down into sources of

conflict--the Security Council's mantra of "root causes." In other words, how to promote the economic and social development that underlies peace. At the same time, Kofi wanted the Panel to be real, to think about what actually can be done. A nice balancing act.

What I can share with you is my impression of what the Panel will be saying, my personal account. You will get the definitive story when the report comes out. Meantime, here goes.

First, regarding structures, the General Assembly and the Security Council. The General Committee should be strengthened so as to take on the active management of the General Assembly. The General Assembly should get out of its clutter and focus on some major problems. Instead of the six "Committees of the Whole," small working committees should be created to address current issues.

For the Security Council, two options will be presented, both recommending an increase in membership to 24. The option which, I think, is more likely to work would add eight members with four year terms and one more with the existing two year term.

Then, as to substance, what to do, the main thrust will be on helping countries to achieve social and economic stability, to be serious about development, aid and trade, pandemic disease and pollution.

It follows that the Security Council and the Secretary General must push peace building, an extension of the principle that governments are responsible to protect their own people. Peace building must have its own prominent place in the Secretariat.

As for armed conflict, prevention (early warning) is the way to go. The preventive arm of the Security Council and the Secretary General should be greatly strengthened.

What about terrorism? As I understand it, the Panel will suggest that state-sponsored terrorism is already covered by existing treaties; and that the UN should take on free-wheeling terrorism specifically aimed at innocent civilians. The Security Council must be much more

active in the pursuit of terrorists, reaching out beyond official stories coming from governments.

On weapons of mass destruction, the Panel goes along with the Blix/Salander Commission, pressing states to live up to their commitments under NPT (the Non Proliferation Treaty concerning nuclear weapons); to curtail and clean up fissile materials. Export of biological pathogens has to be strengthened with help from WHO.

Then on transnational crime, the means to follow through the existing treaties have to be greatly strengthened, with special attention to money laundering. Europe has led the way on how to get a handle on international crime.

What I find most encouraging is the way that development and security are brought together, a unifying objective for the UN, indeed for the whole UN system. Human security, that's it.

Where can the UN go from here? If the main lines laid out by the Panel are followed, some old log-jams will be broken and new energy released into this world drama. Bringing a substantial representation of the developing world into the Security Council would go a long way toward easing the tension between the P-5 and the General Assembly. Managing, shaking down and focusing the General Assembly could move this show from sterile talk to some useful work. And coalescing the wole "Mother UN" on building a universal platform for peace--the good society--would link the authority of the Security Council (anticipating conflicts, peace making) with the Assembly's mandate for social and economic development. What a new lease on life could come if human security along with governing as protecting were to carry the day. For the long haul, however, the Bretton Woods institutions will have to be married to a new UN, giving some regulation and direction to the huge global economy. And the sprawl of Specialized Agencies must also be formally married to a new UN.

In the immediate, surely giant USA will need the UN to salvage Iraq; and to give some dignity and legitimacy to the treatment of captive Saddam Hussein.

What I have left out is the critical importance of so-called civil society, the voice of the people, especially in those prominent democracies that can make or break the UN. Governments mostly don't like NGOs with their fingers on sensitive issues and their unrelenting energy. What joy to see fresh and sophisticated young people taking hold, as I have seen in the United Nations Association in Canada. They are my best hope.

Short of mass suicide--the nuclear winter--the jerry-built UN will survive and grow.