

United Nations: Weak leaders wanted

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To save his legacy Ban Ki-moon must refresh his top team with people who understand the UN's founding principles

Seventy years ago today, warships lay anchored in a cove off Newfoundland, Canada. Churchill and Roosevelt set out principles for a post-war world, one of the first steps towards the creation of the United Nations. Today that institution confronts a vast array of problems, some potentially terminal. It is needed in ways its founders could not have imagined. And it is sorely neglected.

The myopia of powerful governments is clearly shown in their preference for weak candidates for UN secretary-general. Occasionally they misjudge their man, with interesting results. With Dag Hammarskjöld, it was peacekeeping. Kofi Annan's staff devised the millennium development goals. This time - with the quiet reappointment of secretary-general Ban Ki-moon this summer - they got what they wanted. Mr Ban presides over the slow decay of the UN secretariat, an institution that should be working, as Hammarskjöld said, on the edge of progress. In its last annual report, Human Rights Watch wrote "far from condemning repression, Ban sometimes went out of his way to portray oppressive governments in a positive light". China, Burma, Sri Lanka have benefited from Mr Ban's lax hand. To save his legacy he must refresh his top team with people who understand the UN's principles.

In Washington, the flame of Roosevelt and Truman burns low. Barack Obama and his UN ambassador Susan Rice are too aware of the Republican opposition at home to make a powerful case for the UN. But Mr Obama seeks retrenchment, and an effective UN would help him achieve it. The emerging powers are jealous of their sovereignty and ambivalent about human rights. The challenge is to bind these powers into a progressive security council. Take Libya. Britain, America and France should never again elide the responsibility to protect populations with regime change. Brazil and India, among others, must also recognise that when a ruler declares war on his own people he forfeits sovereignty.

Meanwhile, deeper currents are making the UN more, not less relevant. The UN is midwife to the world's newest country, South Sudan. To date, one of the few agreements about climate change is that it should be addressed through the UN. After the Arab spring it is harder to deny that universal rights are universal, and amid a panoply of international organisations only the UN combines universal membership with universal values. A thousand UN services express these values, from tending to the latest famine to international courts and tribunals, from research and statistics to health, elections, children or culture. Many of them succeed quietly every day.

For this the UN has won the Nobel peace prize 10 times, but peacekeeping itself is neglected. Iraq and Afghanistan were lessons in the impotence of force without legitimacy. UN peacekeepers combine both, at a fraction of the cost. For all the disasters since the cold war, UN peacekeepers have a better peaceful and democratic legacy in the worst conflicts than anyone else at a fraction of the cost. A month of war in Iraq cost the same as the UN peacekeeping budget for 16 missions. But the troops the UN is lent are poorly resourced. Worse, operations are crippled by the UN's broken

human resources system .

Currently before diplomats in New York are proposals on civilian capacity. It is not unknown for applications to rest in the UN's intray for five years before being considered. A way must be established for the UN to hire quality staff for critical work within a few months.

The United Nations resembles Gaudi's cathedral, the Sagrada Familia. It is half-built, it has great achievements to its name, but its parts are not connected and there are new threats to its foundations. Millions of people need its sanctuary and protection. History will frown on those who do not build.

P.S.

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