

Guest Essay

A RENAISSANCE FOR MULTILATERAL WORK

Jan Egeland

During my years in Secretary-General Kofi Annan's senior management team, I saw firsthand how international multilateral action with heroic local and regional efforts effectively helped build progress and peace in war-torn societies, such as Liberia and Sierra Leone, eastern Congo and Burundi, Angola and Southern Sudan, northern Uganda, Kosovo, and Nepal. Through the United Nations, we also coordinated massive international relief in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2005 South Asian earthquake, and the 2006 Lebanon War as well as in the Horn of Africa, southern Africa, and Darfur. In several of these overwhelming emergencies, hundreds of thousands of lives were predicted to be lost. Though its heightened effectiveness has not been recognized by much of the world media and many national parliaments, multinational action, building on local capacities, averted the most somber of these predictions. More often than not, I have seen how the international community, in spite of often half-hearted investment by the powerful and the rich, has succeeded in providing life-saving assistance and protection to those in greatest need. Through the United Nations and other international organizations, we can organize tremendous processes of change if we have a sufficient minimum of political support and resources from the most powerful capitals and the richest nations.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

We fail as a collective humanity when multilateral action lacks a unity of purpose. We fail, tragically and repeatedly, when the United Nations and regional organizations are not provided by

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their member states with the political will and the economic and security resources needed during crises. Senseless bickering and passive neglect among the powerful nations have produced suffering in Darfur, in Afghanistan, among Palestinians, and among the growing numbers of climate change victims in southern nations.

The past decade has offered numerous examples that illustrate the inadequacy of uncoordinated multilateralism and, even worse, unabashed unilateralism.

First, there was no lack of early warnings from us in the United Nations about the growing conflict in Darfur, but most member states were not interested. Many Asian and Arab nations wanted to protect the regime in Khartoum rather than the defenseless civilians in the western desert. The United Nations had facilitated cease-fire agreements in Darfur, but they were not enforced by member states. The humanitarian workers were asked, as in Bosnia in the 1990s, to feed and shelter millions while armed men surrounding the 140 camps planned their next massacres with impunity. It seemed as if Srebrenica and Rwanda were ancient history.

Second, in the build-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2002 to 2003, there were countless warnings against the irresponsible inability of Security Council members to agree on how to deal with Saddam Hussein. There were equally clear warnings that the use of force by the U.S.- and U.K.-led coalition could lead to disastrous results. Those politicians, who chose to rely on speculative, unsubstantiated, and ultimately false intelligence, rather than on the warnings of U.N. staff on the ground or Secretary-General Annan, can now hardly sleep well at night. American and Iraqi medical experts have documented that countless Iraqis died in the 40 months that followed the invasion. In no other place on earth have so many been killed by blunt violence during the last five years as in post-invasion Iraq. Millions died in the Congo and in the Sudan from preventable disease and malnutrition, but Iraq was for years, like no other place, the home of murder and massacres.

Third, a decade with no coherent international efforts to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or to end the Israeli occupation and border closures of Gaza and the West Bank produced what I called

a "ticking time bomb" when I visited Gaza in 2006. Less than a year later, Gaza exploded into the worst internal strife ever. In January 2009, we saw yet another full-scale Israeli invasion, hundreds of dead Palestinian children, and continued rocket fire from Gazan militants into Israel. We reaped the fruit of our inaction: more fertile grounds for new extremism. When you lock 1.5 million Gazans in a cage smaller than an average Norwegian municipality and deprive hundreds of thousands of angry youth of hope, you do not get boy scouts or choirgirls; you get long lines of new terrorists.

Lastly, there would not have been a relentless increase in natural disasters and extreme weather if this global generation had managed to unite around curbing greenhouse gas emissions and preventing climate change as member states generally promised in Rio de Janeiro at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. Seven times more livelihoods are, in our time and age, devastated by natural disasters than by war. Humanitarian field workers cannot believe that many politicians and industrialists still argue that our explosive global economic growth has not changed the climate. For many years, extreme droughts, hurricanes, and floods have devastated the lives of more and more people. The destructive effects of natural disasters, as always, are much greater in poor developing countries, but even in Europe, the extreme heat wave of 2003 took tens of thousands of lives. Decades ago, leading scientists on United Nations climate panels agreed that policy and behavioral change were urgently needed. If North Americans, Europeans, Chinese, and others had started the process of change there and then, we would have had positive results at a lower cost.

In spite of and because of all this, I believe there is still reason for optimism. The coming years can and will see a revival of multilateral action partly because the experience of recent years has proven the costly futility of unilateral force. Since 2003, the United States has spent the incomprehensible sum of one trillion dollars on its war and still unsuccessful nation building project in Iraq. That is several times more than the combined bill of all United Nations humanitarian, developmental, environmental, peacekeeping,

peacemaking, and democracy-building efforts in a hundred countries during the same years.

The age of investment in joint, collective, and coherent action through the United Nations has arrived for the rich and the powerful member states. As we move from a unipolar world of U.S. dominance to a multipolar world in which China and India will also become superpowers, it will be crucial to not only recognize the political importance of Beijing and New Delhi, but also to demand they assume their shares of international political and economic burdens. Just as the United States cannot shrink from its obligation to push for a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, China cannot pretend to be a developing nation when it is a dominant investor in Africa, and as such, it must play a leading role in enforcing an end to the carnage in Darfur. In the new world, the Security Council and the G8 should reflect economic and political realities.

Just as Iraq is the symbol of unilateral impotence, the momentous positive change that has taken place in some of the worst war zones of our generation in Africa is a signal of multilateral potency. A few years ago, war, chaos, and massacres reigned from Liberia to Angola and from Southern Sudan to Sierra Leone. Cost-efficient multilateral action with local and regional allies helped bring and build peace.

THE GROWING STRENGTH OF MANY

Several factors have created new opportunities for us to achieve greater global progress, and in the coming generation, much more can be achieved. First, even with the less than generous investment of previous generations in peacemaking and peacekeeping, the Human Security Reports document that there are half as many wars now as when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Before the global economic recession, World Bank economists could for the first time record that there were under one billion people who live on less than the index-linked 1.25 dollars a day and fewer than two billion who live on less than two dollars per day, even in a growing

world population of 6.7 billion. Thus, those of us in the growing global middle and upper classes have fewer absolute poor to lift out of abject misery and fewer wars to end.

Second, superior technology has increased the potential for information sharing and multilateral action. When in the spring of 2004 the regime in Khartoum blocked our access to the civilians in Darfur for months, our experts were able to plan in detail relief operations with advanced satellite imagery and computer programs that could identify the locations and sizes of displaced and refugee populations in Darfur and Chad. We could use other satellite data and computer projections to determine whether there was underground water in the region and whether the roads to the camps would be usable in the coming rainy seasons. U.N. specialized agencies and interagency teams now make use of sophisticated models projecting weather patterns, livestock availability, migration trends, and patterns in local tension. We have advanced early warning systems for hunger, disease, and conflict, which make it impossible to claim we did not know what was brewing.

Third, we have the biggest and most efficient network of like-minded intergovernmental, governmental, and non-governmental organizations that serve as paths for future investments in peace and development. Humanitarian agencies can now feed, vaccinate, and provide primary school for children for a few dollars a day, even in the remotest areas. Such investment is, dollar by dollar, more cost-effective than any private or public venture in any Northern or Western society. These non-governmental and U.N. organizations will also speak up more for neglected peoples. During my three and a half years as U.N. Emergency Relief Coordinator, the improved efficacy of this international aid network allowed me to advocate more effectively than I had dreamt of before assuming the position in 2003.

A RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT

Every working week for more than three years, I spoke to the international media about unmet relief needs following natural di-

sasters such as the South Asian earthquake when helicopters had to be urgently found, about forgotten emergencies such as in northern Uganda when 20,000 children had been kidnapped, and about the abuse of civilians and the rape of women in Darfur and eastern Congo. Several heads of state from Zimbabwe to Sudan came after my scalp. In previous years, I would not have been able to keep my job, but Secretary-General Annan had great integrity and always defended my right to speak the truth.

However, we must also hold world leaders accountable to their obligation to defend defenseless civilians threatened around the world. World leaders from the United States, China, Russia, Europe, the Islamic world, and Africa—some 190 heads of state and governments in all—solemnly swore at the September 2005 World Summit to uphold a "responsibility to protect" vulnerable communities when their national authorities cannot or will not provide such protection.

I was there when it happened. For many months, diplomats from all U.N. member states had sat in windowless basement meeting rooms to ponder the Millennium Plus Five Summit declaration. For the first time, there was a decisive majority of states who rose above the medieval principle of not "interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign states," and the following text was agreed upon by consensus when kings, presidents, and prime ministers met in the General Assembly Hall of the United Nations:

...We are prepared to take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner, through the Security Council, in accordance with the Charter, including Chapter VII...should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

This "responsibility to protect" is more revolutionary than many world leaders seem willing to admit. They cannot anymore be passive bystanders to carnage. We must aim to translate this responsibility into action to provide protection for beleaguered and

threatened communities. In my seventh and last briefing on the protection of civilians to the Security Council in December 2006, I appealed to the members to make sure that "your responsibility to protect must be depoliticized, become a truly shared interest, and translate into joint action by all members of this Council and our global organization."

What does this mean? It means that more countries must give more forces to peacekeeping and peace enforcing operations undertaken by the United Nations or such regional organizations like the African Union. These forces need to be operationally capable. It means that these and other U.N. member states will need to enforce economic sanctions on and individual judicial accountability for political and military leaders who attack civilian populations. If the new and emerging powers such as India and China did more to defend women and children worldwide, the Western powers, with their questionable global post-Iraq vision, could and should do less to push such moral causes. More than anything, it means we must recognize that we are neighbors and we are culturally and politically linked; we cannot stand by as civilians and non-combatants are killed, raped, and mutilated. Empowered by new opportunities and obligated by longstanding responsibilities, we must act immediately, forcefully, and coherently with other U.N. members to end the abuse.