

United Nations meets in crisis at Millennium Summit

Julie Hyland
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The three-day United Nations Millennium Summit in New York, which brought together 189 world leaders, ended last Friday. The summit was ostensibly called to define the UN's role in the twenty first century.

Taken collectively, the documents prepared for the summit coupled with the five-minute speeches made by each head of state painted a devastating picture of life for much of the world's population in the new millennium. Political instability, growing social inequality and poverty, ethnic conflict, human rights abuses, and the spread of deadly diseases such as AIDS all threaten the fabric of civilised society in the twenty first century, speaker after speaker declared.

In a report published earlier this year, *We the Peoples—the Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century*, UN Secretary General Koffi Annan warned that whilst globalisation offered “great opportunities”, its benefits were “very unevenly distributed while its costs are borne by all”. Using for his model of current global social relations a “global village” comprising 1,000 inhabitants, Annan wrote that of these, 150 lived in an affluent area, 780 in poorer areas, and 70 in transitional neighbourhoods. Just 200 people in the village disposed of 86 percent of its wealth.

Such inequality was creating a political backlash as seen in the protests outside the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle last year. “Who among us would not wonder how long a village in this state can survive without taking steps to ensure that all its inhabitants can live free from hunger and safe from violence, drinking clear water, breathing clear air, and knowing that their children will have real chances in life?” Annan asked.

The summit adopted an eight-page declaration promising to “uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level,” but the UN was incapable of proposing any serious policy to achieve this, despite the fact that the summit had been three years in

preparation. For all its hand wringing, the UN defends the very economic system that has produced the catastrophic social conditions it bemoans.

The main practical thrust of the summit was to call for an expansion of the UN's police powers to make the organisation a more effective instrument of imperialist policy around the world.

From the US-British bombing of Iraq in December 1998, to the US-NATO assault on Yugoslavia in 1999, to the British intervention in Sierra Leone in May this year, the major powers have been asserting their ability and “right” to intervene against small countries without the sanction of the UN. Faced with the danger of the UN being marginalized, Annan insisted that the UN adapt itself to new world realities. A long-time servant of imperialism, he pledged to oversee the revamping of the UN in line with the more aggressive appetites of the major powers.

Central to this undertaking was Annan's proposal that the UN drop its past pretensions of defending the national sovereignty of the former colonial countries. Under the guise of “humanitarian considerations”, the UN would offer the imperialist powers carte blanche to intervene in smaller, weaker nations and establish the political and economic set-up of their choosing. This is the situation in the Balkans, where the UN and NATO between them control virtually every level of administration and have even created political parties.

The UN summit served notice that this is now to be extended to Africa. The assembled leaders agreed that the continent was now the UN's “number one priority”. Africa's plight was not to be tackled by extensive anti-poverty measures, funding for health care, etc. In fact, the summit agreed to cut back on such programmes in order to make “peacekeeping” the UN's “core activity”. US President Clinton declared that the reasons for military intervention should be extended to include factors such as

the growth of AIDS.

Discussions were held on the establishment of some form of UN standing army. Clinton spoke of the need for “peacekeepers that can be rapidly deployed with the right training and equipment, missions well-defined and well-led.” Britain called for the creation of a UN rapid reaction force and a permanent headquarters for training UN “peacekeepers.”

If in the past the West felt somewhat constrained in its drive to control the resources and peoples of the planet, this was due far more to the political exigencies of the Cold War than the proclamations of the UN. From its inception 55 years ago, the UN has functioned essentially as an arm of the Great Powers. It was created in order to mediate inter-imperialist disputes and contain the struggles of the colonial peoples in such a way as to protect the basic interests of world capitalism.

At the end of the Second World War Europe lay in ruins and the old colonial empires in Africa and Asia were tottering. Fascism and war had broadly discredited capitalism in the eyes of millions. The existence of the Soviet Union, despite the counter-revolutionary policies of its Stalinist rulers, represented a constant threat to capitalism's hegemony.

To offset these dangers, the UN brought together three basic forces—the imperialist powers, led by the US; the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR; and the national bourgeoisies in the colonial and economically backward countries. In Africa, India and elsewhere, the Western powers, wherever possible, handed over power to politically reliable representatives of the national bourgeoisie to ensure that the break-up of colonial forms of rule did not result in socialist revolution.

The UN formally enshrined the principle of the “equality of nations” through its advocacy of national sovereignty and self-determination. When imperialism's interests were threatened, however, the UN was prepared to provide a cover for military intervention, as in Korea in the early 1950s.

The role of the Stalinist bureaucracy within the UN was crucial. While at times it gave backing to various anti-colonial movements as part of its *real politik* struggle with the West, its essential function was to operate as a global policeman against the workers' movement and oppressed masses. The Cold War conflict with Stalinism served both to unify the Western powers under US hegemony and somewhat restrain their predatory ambitions in the former colonies.

As Annan correctly indicates in his report, the collapse

of the Soviet Union a decade ago has changed all this. Under conditions in which global integration has deepened the struggle between nation states for competitive advantage, the US has shown that it is only too willing to wield its military superiority with increased frequency.

The ruling classes in Europe and Japan are far less willing to accept US hegemony. The growing tensions between the US and Europe have been reflected in recent years within the UN, particularly in regard to Iraq, where the US and Britain have met resistance from France, Russia and China. Both Japan and a reunified Germany are demanding their place on the UN Security Council.

For their part, Russia and China look on the growth of Western militarism with concern and are intent on opposing plans to make UN “peacekeeping” operations more directly subservient to the foreign policy aims of the Great Powers. Fearful that they could be next on the list of “rogue states”, Russia and China expressed concern at the “wilful use of force” to “interfere in the domestic affairs of others,” as Chinese President Jiang Zemin put it.

Such issues formed the backdrop to the discussion at the Millennium Summit. The US, Europe and Japan were all agreed on the need to strengthen the UN's military role, but could not agree on how a revamped UN military force should be funded and under whose command it should function.

The aggressive reassertion of imperialist interests is the shape of things to come. The day after the summit closed, the British government unilaterally dispatched its elite parachute regiment to Sierra Leone in a successful mission to “take out” a group of rebel forces holding British troops hostage.



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