

A Tribute to the UNO on its 52nd Anniversary

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We should have little hesitation in paying homage to the UN on its 52nd anniversary, and even the most die-hard pessimist would agree that thanks to the UN, the world today is certainly not worse than it has been and in all probability, it is better.

I am one of those who believe that the UN has amply justified its existence and has many praiseworthy achievements to its credit on the political, military as well as economic fronts.

On the political-military front, the achievement can be summed up in one single sentence - we have been spared a third world war. No doubt, there are many on-going conflicts, like the Arab-Israel and our own Kashmir dispute; but, if these have not yet been resolved, they have atleast been successfully contained.

On the political-military front, I would consider the UN to have played a significant role in the case of collapsed states. Let me explain this term: collapsed state. A normal state is one that can successfully maintain law and order within its borders and protect the life, liberty and property of all its citizens. When, for various reasons, like secessionist warfare or separatist movements, or natural calamities like prolonged drought leading to famine, etc. a state is unable to do this, we call it a collapsed state or an inadequate state. The 1990s, in particular, have seen the emergence of many such collapsed or inadequate states like Angola, Rwanda, Somalia, Afghanistan and Bosnia-Herzgovina, in which the central governments have proved incapable of maintaining law and order and protecting the life, liberty and property of their own citizens.

In Angola, incessant infighting coupled with severe drought caused

the worst ever famines in human history. Hundreds and thousands of people were dying daily. The world community, acting through the UNO, decided to step in and offer food and other assistance on a massive scale. Plan loads of food and medicines were daily flown into the country. But no sooner would the planes land, armed gangs and tribal warlords would attack the landed supplies, plunder



the godowns, and carry away bag loads of food and medicines. This fact soon compelled the UNO to undertake to supply and distribute the donated food and medicines under UN military escort and supervision.

The second example of a successful UN humanitarian intervention is Rwanda. Here, intense fighting between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes had brought about the conditions of a collapsed state. Regular newspaper readers and TV news viewers would be familiar with the gory details of daily massacres, the horrible genocide and the terrible human rights

abuses that were taking place in Rwanda. Here, once again, the UN stepped in, and did great humanitarian work by way of ensuring regular supply of food and medicines to millions of refugees, huddled in various refugee camps. This was, of course, in addition to trying to negotiate peace between the warring tribes.

While talking of Rwanda, the case of erstwhile Yugoslavia and the bloody, fratricidal conflicts between the Serbs, Croats and the Muslims in Bosnia-Herzgovina also come to mind. In the case of erstwhile Yugoslavia, especially Bosnia-Herzgovina, the UN achievement has been two-fold. Firstly, the UN has played no mean role in trying to reduce massacres by way of negotiating ceasefires, almost on a daily basis. Secondly, the UN mounted one of the most difficult humanitarian relief programs in human history. Under the most trying and difficult situations, with civil war raging all round them, UN troops succeeded in supplying food, medicines and warm clothes to helpless civilians trapped in besieged, war-devastated and isolated pockets.

However, despite Angola, Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzgovina, it can be safely said that the world is becoming a more peaceful place. The Cold War had stirred up many hot proxy wars, during the period 1950 to 1970, such as the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Mozambique, etc. Those days are gone now. According to the Stockholm Peace Research Foundation, the number of wars or open

violent conflicts has been steadily coming down over the years. The year 1987 witnessed 36 wars or open violent conflicts. The number came down to 33 in 1988 and kept steadily declining thereafter to 32 in 1989, 31 in 1990, and 30 in 1991. While for the years 1992, 1993 and 1994, the number of wars or open violent conflicts stayed steady at a record low of 27.

Turning from the political-military front to the economic front, we once again find that the UN has achieved much. In little less than a generation, thanks to UN endeavours, remarkable progress has been achieved, and an equally remarkable change has been brought about in mankind's attitude towards poverty, economic development, human habitat, women and children. In little less than a generation, thanks to UN endeavours, real incomes in the third world have more than doubled, child death rates have more than halved, malnutrition rates have fallen by more than thirty per cent, life expectancy has increased by about one-third, the proportion of children enrolled in primary schools has risen from about 50 per cent to 75 per cent, and the percentage of families with access to safe drinking water has risen from 10 per cent to 60 per cent.

The UN family planning campaign and family planning assistance has also begun to show beneficial effects. According to a UN publication, "Vision of Hope", published recently to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the UNO, the proportion of couples using modern contraceptives has risen from almost nothing to more than fifty per cent and the average family size is falling in almost every country.

The two major issues of concern before the UN today are environmental protection and sustainable development and perhaps the single greatest achievement of the UN in recent years has been its ability to raise the level of world consciousness in these two domains, thanks mainly

to such programs as the One Earth Agency, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP, in short), and its landmark conferences like the Conference of Human Development in Stockholm in 1972 and the famous Earth Summit in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro. Again, in these two domains of Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development, despite severe financial constraints, the UN has been in the forefront of curbing acid rain, containing nuclear accidents, protecting oceans, preventing over-fishing, reducing traffic in illegal waste and safeguarding endangered species.

Finally, this brief enumeration of UN achievements cited here to commemorate its fifty second anniversary, would be incomplete without a quick reference to the yeoman work the UN has been doing in the field of protecting human rights. It is to this Commission that the UN's General Secretary refers the thousands of complaints received regarding human rights violations from individuals and Non-Government Organizations (NGO), from all over the world. Since 1970, the UN has begun the laudable practice of publishing its annual reports, the complaints received, alleging violations of human rights, along with the replies received, if any, from the accused governments. Thanks to these reports, many governments have been put on the defensive, and forced to improve their human rights record, in order to avoid adverse global publicity.

All said and done, we should have little hesitation in paying homage to the UN on its 52nd anniversary, and even the most die-hard pessimist would agree that thanks to the UN, the world today is certainly not worse than it has been and in all probability, it is better.

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