

WE DO NEED THE UNITED NATIONS

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We the peoples of the United Nations determined ... to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security ...

Thus begins the preamble to the Charter of the United Nations, which came into force 63 years ago on this date, the 24th of October 1945. Has the UN lived up to these lofty goals? The answer is mixed at best. Yet, I shall argue that the world does need the UN, better in a different mode of operation.

Why do I say that the UN falls short of its declared goals? The advent of the UN has not made much impact on the ideal of living together peacefully as harmonious neighbors, respecting fairness and cooperation, and coming together for the cause of international peace, security and justice. Wars and bloodshed have not stopped; instances of genocide have not diminished; dictators continue to hold sway and stifle the voices of the people they profess to represent; modern economic colonization of poor countries continues unabated; the UN has not been effective in disarmament, non-proliferation and peace keeping; nor has it prevented battles between neighboring nations, and many international disputes have continued to fester without resolution.

Perhaps these criteria are too stringent and, given that the UN does not have the instruments to enforce its directives, it may be unfair to use them to judge it. After all, the UN does have some virtues to it. The member states continue to use it as a diplomatic conduit for resolving critical misunderstandings and for debating among governments; when natural and manmade disasters strike, the UN and its agencies are ready to deliver humanitarian assistance to millions of sufferers; they provide education, health services, relief and social services to untold number of refugees. Its specialized agencies such as UNESCO, IAEA, ITU, WMO and WHO deal with problems that are not all related to emergencies; they analyze and regulate issues that concern all the countries and do so with a reasonable success in some instances; they speak out on issues of common concern such as basic education, cancer therapies and abject poverty. Yet, the fraction of the budget that the UN system spends on such important matters is quite small.

One of the anomalies in the UN system as a whole is the ostensible zeal espoused for the democratic process even by the countries in which public opinion is muffled by their tyrant rulers. And, where it matters, the powerful countries which practice democracy in their own nations have no patience with the democratic process when self-interest makes it convenient to ignore it. Altogether, the result is that the burden of the process seems to exhaust everyone to the point that aspects of execution get relegated to a secondary status.

Despite these criticisms, it is clear that the UN system is the only one that can speak out on issues that are cherished in its charter. There is much to divide humanity: race, color, history, language, food, dress, and any number of quirks in our thought processes. They

are enough to keep us apart at best and render us actively hostile to each other at the worst. An honest effort to respect, perhaps even celebrate, the differences among us --- instead of using them as excuses for aggressive decimation --- would become less possible without the UN.

The UN system must therefore be strengthened by steering it away from the dismal record so far. It cannot be effective unless its member states obey its principles and take their responsibilities seriously. Another anomaly, namely the representation of the Security Council, needs to be corrected. The member states, big and small, must gain the trust of the international community by being true to the ideals with which the UN started and by working together by abandoning pride. Mechanisms must be put in place to allow for the UN to evolve rationally without its enormous bureaucratic overhead. And the UN must receive adequate support. This is not merely a matter of charity but one of self-preservation. The global connectivity today dictates that we cannot prosper by leaving behind any part of the world too far.

When times are tough, as now, it is easy to let the strong trounce the weak, and push further back those who cannot bring themselves up from the rear. It is easy to forget good neighborly behavior such as tolerance and accommodation. It is easy to throw into wilderness issues such as human rights. The UN can and must speak out on these issues. Ultimately, the UN system cannot be expected to have the resources (e.g., the military) to enforce its decisions; even a much more homogeneous entity such as the EU has been unable to do this satisfactorily. Thus the authority of the UN should quite often be moral and be based on ideas and ideals. This underlines the great importance of having people at the UN who care deeply about larger issues of humanity, articulate them with perspective and without rancor, and put the usually intransigent nations to action.