



Roundup

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59th Session of the General Assembly: Making 2005 the Year of Change for the United Nations

The 59th session of the General Assembly saw Member States take on 159 items in its agenda covering a number of issues, ranging from efforts to revitalize its work, the publication of the report of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change and preparation for the high-level meeting of the GA next September, all seen as part of the process of collective reform of the UN system. More than 120 speakers took up the question of UN reform, emphasizing both progress and the way ahead.

On 21 September, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan set the tone for the high-level debate as he urged world leaders to do everything within their power to restore respect for the rule of law—both domestically and internationally. “Today the rule of law is at risk around the world,” he said, pointing to places such as Iraq, Darfur, northern Uganda, as well as in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. “Again and again, we see laws shamelessly disregarded—those that ordain respect for innocent life, for civilians, for the vulnerable—especially children.”

With the UN celebrating its 60th anniversary, Mr. Annan called on Member States to “make 2005 the year of change for the United Nations.” He stressed that Member States would need to focus on implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and on the recommendations of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, established to focus primarily on threats to peace and security in the 21st century.

Also providing a backdrop for the opening of the 2004 session was the beginning of reconstruction efforts in the wake of a number of hurricanes and floods that had battered a number of Caribbean islands and the southeastern coastal areas of the United States. A number of officials from the region joined leaders from other small island States calling for a more enabling economic environment and reduction of the harmful pollution and accompanying climate change. They urged the world’s nations, particularly richer industrialized countries, never to lose sight of so-called “soft threats”—poverty, hunger, and the threat of natural disasters, inadequate access to clean water, sanitation, health care and education. Mention was made a number of times to the International Meeting to Review the Implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action (BPoA) for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, held in Mauritius in January 2005 (see *NGLS Roundup 118*).

UN-CIVIL SOCIETY RELATIONS

From 4-5 October the General Assembly took up agenda item 52, on revitalizing its work, and item 54, on strengthening the United Nations system under which Member States spoke on UN-civil society relations. While several Member States expressed their interest in enhancing civil society participation in the UN’s work, some recommended that a cautious approach be taken in reforming current UN practices so that the Organization retains its intergovernmental nature.

Speakers provided preliminary views on the findings and recommendations of two reports: the report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on UN-Civil Society Relations (see *NGLS Roundup 113*) and the Secretary-General’s report in response to the Panel’s recommendations. Introducing the Secretary-General’s report to the Assembly, UN Deputy Secretary-General Louise Fréchette recognized that NGOs and other stakeholders are now making increasingly important contributions to global policy debates and intergovernmental deliberations in areas ranging from the environment to gender mainstreaming.

The Panel of Eminent Persons, chaired by the former President of Brazil Fernando Henrique Cardoso, was mandated to assess and draw lessons from UN interaction with civil society and identify ways to enhance this rapport. It recommended, among other things, that the UN needed to become more outward looking; foster multi-constituency processes open to elected representatives, NGOs, the private sector, indigenous groups, etc.; place greater emphasis on country-level engagement; and invest more in partnerships.

In his response to the Cardoso Panel’s report, Mr. Annan made a number of suggestions, among which: the establishment of a single accreditation process for NGOs and the creation of a single trust fund to better support the participation of NGO representatives from developing countries.

Wrapping up the two-day discussion, GA President Jean Ping (Gabon) said that Member States had recognized the importance of UN-civil society relations and the contribution made by NGOs to the UN process. Speakers, he stated, welcomed the idea to have more engagement at the local level. While some wished to see civil society participation in the General

Assembly, others suggested that it be limited to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). There was support on the creation of a special fund for NGO participation, he added, but more discussions would be needed to clarify its mode of operation. In conclusion, Mr. Ping proposed that further consultations with Member States should be undertaken on the matter.

Prior to the GA meeting, NGOs prepared written statements detailing their views on the reports. NGOs welcomed the initiative undertaken by the Panel and the Secretary-General to examine ways to enhance UN-civil society relations. While no resolution was passed during the GA meeting, civil society organizations encouraged Member States to keep the dialogue open and expressed their interest in being consulted if discussions were to be pursued. A draft resolution on strengthening the UN system with references to enhancing UN-civil society relations is currently pending. More information on UN-civil society relations is available online (www.un-ngls.org/UNreform.htm).

A MORE SECURE WORLD: OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

On 2 December 2004, the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change launched its report, *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*, which provides the Panel's recommendations on far-reaching changes to boost the ability of the United Nations to deal effectively with new and future threats caused by poverty and environmental degradation, terrorism, civil war, conflict between States, weapons of mass destruction and organized crime. It also includes two proposals for expanding membership of the Security Council, recommends universal membership for the Geneva-based Commission on Human Rights, and suggests that major changes are needed in other UN bodies to make them more effective, efficient and equitable.

The changes recommended address some of the most controversial global issues, such as when the use of force is justified, as well as many of the most complex, including efforts to combat poverty and disease. The report argued that today—in the age of global commerce, terrorism and weapons of mass destruction—a threat to any nation or people is a threat to all, and that nations must work together to maintain their security. While emphasizing the need for collective security, the Panel said that sovereign States “are still the frontline responders to today's threats,” but many of them needed to be better equipped “to exercise their sovereignty responsibly.”

“If we do not act resolutely, and together, the threats described in the report can overwhelm us,” Mr. Annan said, formally introducing the report to the GA on 8 December. “It is hardly possible to over-state what is at stake... [The High-Level Panel] has risen to the challenge—and now the burden falls on you. It is up to you, the Member States, to act on their recommendations and to make 2005 the year of change at the United Nations.”

Even before its 2 December release, the High-Level Panel's report featured prominently in the Assembly's discussions. During a three-day debate, more than 100 speakers weighed in on the issue of Security Council reform, most expressing determination to untangle some of the more complex issues that had deadlocked that debate for more than ten years—from making the Council's work more open and transparent to expanding its membership and reforming the veto.

Both of the Panel's formulas for an enlarged Security Council increases the membership to 24, from the current 15, but differ on allowing more permanent seats. The first provides for six new permanent seats without veto power in addition to the five that currently hold it and three more two-year rotating seats divided among regional groupings. The second plan envisages no new permanent seats but creates a new category of eight four-year renewable-term seats and one new two-year, non-permanent, non-renewable seat, all without veto power.

HIGH-LEVEL PLENARY MEETING OF THE 60TH SESSION (MILLENNIUM +5 SUMMIT)

Recognizing the urgent need to again bring world leaders together to review the implementation of the Millennium Declaration and the integrated follow-up to other major UN conferences and summits, the GA, on 15 December, unanimously adopted a resolution agreeing to hold the High-Level Plenary Meeting of the 60th Session—more commonly known as the Millennium+5 Summit—from 14-16 September 2005. The high-level plenary meeting will follow the basic format and structure of the Millennium Summit held in 2000: three days of plenary debate, made up of two meetings per day, and four roundtable discussions. GA President Jean Ping, opening the Assembly's high-level debate, said, “The commemoration next year of the sixtieth anniversary...will provide us with an opportunity to take stock of the progress achieved since the Millennium Declaration and to look with equanimity towards the future. We must, therefore, pool our resources in preparing for that eagerly anticipated event,” he said, inviting all the Assembly's members to “work together with a view to adapting the United Nations to the needs of our times and to preparing to better face current and future challenges.”

In particular, the war in Iraq has divided the international community and brought to light fundamental differences among Member States on how to ensure collective security in the face of increased threats of terrorism and deadly weapons. The Secretary-General has warned that those precautions have greatly overshadowed other concerns, especially the targets established through the Millennium Development Goals: cutting extreme poverty and hunger by half, cutting infant mortality by two-thirds, halting HIV/AIDS infection, and providing universal primary education, all by 2015.

Several NGOs expressed their disappointment with the modalities specified in the GA resolution for the September high-level meeting. As it stands, the resolution offers civil society the opportunity for one presentation at the Summit as well as an informal interactive hearing, called by the GA and expected to take place in June 2005, as an input to the preparatory process. With the UN calling upon civil society to rally around the internationally agreed development goals and the Millennium Declaration, NGOs felt that a more active participation at the Summit would have garnered stronger partnerships and spurred civil society to collaborate more closely with the UN and its Member States. Discussions between civil society representatives, the General Assembly President's Office and a group of ten facilitators, consisting of Member States, on the format of the interactive hearing are ongoing.

DISARMAMENT AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

The Assembly adopted 55 resolutions and decisions put forth by the First Committee (Disarmament and International Security) related mainly to the pace and path of nuclear disarmament, reducing nuclear danger, and preventing the terrorist acquisition of weapons of mass destruction. The voting pattern reflected general agreement on the fundamental disarmament and non-proliferation goals, with substantial disagreements remaining on the ways to achieve them.

Speakers highlighted a “tension between nuclear legality and nuclear reality,” as well as certain countries’ “serial non-compliance” with global treaties. Some warned that pursuing nuclear non-proliferation without nuclear disarmament could be detrimental and counter-productive, while others lamented that funds, which could help States meet the MDGs, were instead being earmarked for military purposes.

New resolutions tabled this year included one on the Hague Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation, which calls for greater restraint in developing, testing, using, and spreading ballistic missiles. It does not prohibit States from owning ballistic missiles nor from benefiting from the peaceful use of outer space.