**Can Ban Ki-moon Save The United Nations?**

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United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon outlined his strategic objectives for 2011 during his first press conference of the new year on January 14th. While refusing to disclose whether he intends to run for a second term as Secretary General, he vowed to “build on progress…that places a premium on the global legitimacy and pulling power of the United Nations.” He committed to continue his efforts to strengthen the United Nations from within with increased transparency and efficiency, and defended his own administration against what he called “unfounded allegations” from a former colleague that he had not shown any real interest in fighting corruption at the UN.

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The Secretary General laid out as his objectives for 2011 essentially a continuation of feel-good but expensive and ineffective UN programs from past years. These include climate change and advancing the transfer of wealth from rich nations to the poorer countries of the world under the mantle of the UN’s Millennium Development Goals.

However, when it came to addressing the UN’s handling of more immediate dangers to peace and security, he could not paper over the glaring holes in his vaunted “global legitimacy and pulling power of the United Nations.”

For example, UN peacekeeping forces have been unable to protect civilians in the Côte d’Ivoire, or even their own personnel, from attacks incited by the incumbent president Laurent Koudou Gbagbo who refuses to step down after losing the recent presidential election to the legitimately elected president — Alassane Ouattara.  In fact, the UN troops have been removing themselves from blockades set up by Gbagbo’s forces while Ouattara remains trapped in a hotel that Gbagbo’s forces have been blockading.

Ban Ki-moon announced that the Security Council is discussing his request for additional peacekeeping troops but was unable to explain how that would make any difference on the ground. As was the case in Rwanda and Bosnia, the UN appears to be helpless in carrying out its mission to stop violence against unarmed civilians. When asked for his reaction to Ouattara’s call for the removal of Mr. Gbagbo by force, the Secretary General punted the question of whether to use military force for this purpose to the African Union. “Now it’s up to them,” he said.

Wouldn’t an invasion of a sovereign nation without specific UN Security Council authorization constitute the same kind of “illegal act” that Ban Ki-moon’s predecessor Kofi Annan accused the United States and its coalition of committing when they forcibly removed Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq?  How does allowing the African Union to replace the UN Security Council in determining when force should be used to remove Gbagbo enhance “the global legitimacy and pulling power of the United Nations?”

In the Sudan, where a referendum in South Sudan to approve secession from the north appears to have proceeded without any major disruptions, violence is still erupting along the border and in Darfur. Again the United Nations mission there has been unable to do anything to stop the violence or even protect its own humanitarian staff from kidnappings.

Moreover, the United Nations undercut the legitimacy of the International Criminal Court when, as reported by Inner City Press and confirmed by the Secretary General’s spokesperson, the UN Mission in Sudan transported a man who has been indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes. The purpose was to supposedly assist in negotiations to help end the violence in Abyei along the north-south border. This individual, Ahmed Harun, had been indicted for assisting nomadic tribes which are accused of the killings in Abyei. Yet the United Nations thinks he can now help end the killings that he has been involved with in the first place. The UN decided to provide this very same person with both transportation and the legitimacy that supposedly comes with being associated with a United Nations’ peacekeeping mission.

Regarding Lebanon, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was asked at his press conference about the impact of the collapse of the government led by Saad Hariri, caused by the withdrawal of Hezbollah from the governing coalition, on the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. This UN-backed Tribunal has been investigating the circumstances of the assassination of Hariri’s father, former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, and 22 others.

Although this Tribunal is supposed to be an impartial international body, it depends on financing and other cooperation from the Lebanese government. However, the government of national unity collapsed when 11 cabinet ministers from Hezbollah and allied groups resigned after months of negotiations brokered by Saudi Arabia and Syria failed to produce a compromise over the Tribunal.

Hezbollah, fearing that some of its members would be indicted by the Tribunal for involvement in the assassination, preemptively withdrew from the Lebanese government in the hope of sabotaging the Tribunal. As of the writing of this article, the Tribunal received its first indictment, but its contents remain confidential at this stage.

The Secretary General stressed the importance of continuing the work of the Tribunal but was unable to answer what would happen if a new government in Lebanon ceased funding the tribunal. “The Lebanese Government — whoever may be in power — has the responsibility to provide the funding,” he said.

Even if the Tribunal is able to continue to function and issue indictments against members of Hezbollah and others allegedly responsible for the assassination, who is going to enforce the indictments? The United Nations peacekeeping force in Lebanon - over 12,000 strong - has been unable to prevent Hezbollah from re-arming itself in violation of the ceasefire that ended hostilities with Israel in 2006. As a result, Hezbollah is not only better armed than the Lebanese army and police. In the words of a U.S. State Department spokesman, it is “the most technically-capable terrorist group in the world and a continued security threat to the United States.”

These three peacekeeping missions in the Côte d’Ivoire, Sudan and Lebanon illustrate the United Nations’ impotence in dealing with flashpoints of violence in the world. Such failures alone undercut its legitimacy. But the UN also manages to shoot itself in the foot by sponsoring hate fests such as the discredited Durban conferences against racism. The third such conference event is scheduled to be held at the UN’s New York headquarters this September.

Iran played a key role in the first two Durban conferences. At the 2009 Durban II conference, held in the UN’s Geneva headquarters, Iranian President Ahmadinejad opened the conference with an attack on Israel, which he called the most racist country in the world.

Secretary General Ban Ki-moon did publicly condemn Ahmadinijad’s speech, calling it “unacceptable,” a “very disturbing experience” and “destructive.” However, he remained seated during the entire speech, rather than walk out and thereby salvage whatever shred of dignity the UN had left. Although later admitting Iran had given him false assurances that its remarks at the Durban II conference would be “moderate,” the Secretary General stayed put while Israel and the UN itself were verbally attacked.

The reason Ban Ki-moon provided for his inaction, during a private meeting with high-level Israeli officials (which I reported on in my book Lethal Engagement) was that, as the presiding UN officer of the conference, he was obliged to stay.

Thus, I asked the Secretary General at his January 14th press conference what steps he intended to take to ensure that this September’s Durban III conference would not follow the same destructive pattern of the first two conferences. Here is his verbatim response:

” I’m aware of concerns over the Durban Conference.  The Durban meeting itself is to promote reconciliation and dialogue and cooperation among different cultures and traditions and ethnic groups.  So this in itself has a very good purpose.  Somehow, in the course of debate, this Durban Conference has been very controversial and that is very unfortunate.  The Durban meeting which is going to be held in September is not the formal meeting.  This is going to be an event; therefore, we will have to manage, first of all, properly, not to raise such controversial emotional feelings.  How to deal with this, how to use this Durban process — we may be able to expect and contribute to more a harmonious relationship between and among different understandings, religious faiths and traditions.  As Secretary-General, and as I did last time during the Geneva Durban meeting, I will give my best effort to have smooth proceedings of this meeting.”

Unfortunately, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was not successful in Geneva. He needs to do much better this September at Durban III if the United Nations is to begin having even a shred of the “legitimacy” or “pulling power” that Ban Ki-moon is so intent on building.