

A Bad Quarter for the U.N.

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This year, United Nations officials have spent a lot of time in Washington meeting with administration officials and Congress, trying to defend their funding from sequestration and the threat of other cuts. Small wonder they are concerned: The U.N. has had a rough 2013.

On international peace and security, human rights, and issues of management and accountability, the organization has reminded the world just how ineffective, inept, and embarrassing it is. Let's go through a few of the year's major stories.

- The organization's inability to address the ongoing atrocities in Syria has, by the U.N.'s own estimate, resulted in 70,000 deaths. Russia and China have blocked the Security Council from applying sanctions, so the U.N. has instead focused on distributing humanitarian assistance and engaging in unsuccessful diplomatic initiatives. The U.S. and organizations such as the Arab League have recognized the Syrian rebels, but the U.N. continues to recognize Bashar Assad and his representatives in Turtle Bay.
- North Korea successfully tested a long-range missile in December and a nuclear bomb in February. Both actions flouted multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions. The Security Council responded with a "timid squeak of U.N. indignation," passing a fifth resolution that slightly tightened sanctions on North Korea. Pyongyang was unimpressed. It proceeded to abandon the 1953 armistice (again) and threaten a nuclear strike on the U.S.
- While U.N. secretary general Ban Ki Moon was on stage at the fifth Global Forum of the U.N. Alliance of Civilizations in March, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated, "Just like Zionism, anti-Semitism, and fascism, it becomes unavoidable that Islamophobia must be regarded as a crime against humanity." Only after extensive, critical commentary led by U.N. Watch did the U.N. finally issue a belated condemnation. The event rekindled unwelcome reminders of the U.N.'s famous and odious "Zionism is racism" resolution.
- At a closed-door meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iran accused Israel of "genocide," forcing Australia, Canada, and the U.S. to walk out.
- Following Hugo Chávez's death earlier this week, the U.N.'s Human Rights Council honored the Venezuelan autocrat with a moment of silence. The U.N. flag flew at half mast in Turtle Bay on March 8 "in respect of the death of His

Excellency Mr. Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías, President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela” — who spent years persecuting and intimidating judges, journalists, and human-rights activists.

- The U.N. rejected claims for compensation over the outbreak of cholera it caused in Haiti. U.N. officials tried to cover up their responsibility for the situation, which has killed over 8,000 Haitians and sickened hundreds of thousands more. Subsequent scientific analysis confirmed that the cholera strain originated in southern Asia and was likely introduced by U.N. peacekeepers.
- The U.N. Office of Internal Oversight Services issued a report in January revealing that the U.N. vastly overspent on its travel budget in 2010 and 2011. As U.S. ambassador Joseph Torsella observed, “The 2010–11 budget included \$72.5 million for travel. . . . [Yet] the U.N. spent a total of \$575 million in travel-related expenses in the 2010–11 biennium.” Torsella attributes much of the overrun to unjustified upgrades to business- and first-class airline travel and “direct payments to travelers of, on average, nearly twice the actual cost of travel.”
- The United Nations Dispute Tribunal concluded that U.N. officials in Zimbabwe allowed “humanitarian considerations [to play] second fiddle to political issues.” It found them guilty of “not only managerial ineptitude and highhanded conduct but also bad faith” in the removal of the head of a U.N. humanitarian office in order to stifle reports of political intimidation by Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF and to prevent exposure of the Zimbabwe government’s lack of preparedness for a cholera epidemic that eventually claimed thousands of lives.
- The U.N. Development Program (the organization’s global development agency) commissioned a report on its development efforts that was leaked to Fox News earlier this year. Among its conclusions: “Many of [UNDP’s] activities have only remote connections with poverty, if at all” and “on the whole” UNDP “performs poorly in providing support to its national partners to extract and utilize knowledge based on the lessons that can be potentially learned from its interventions.”

Considering this record of embarrassment, ineffectiveness, and mismanagement, is anyone surprised about recent revelations that U.N. officials and delegates sometimes drink heavily during meetings?

The examples above arose in just the past few months. Far worse examples have been exposed with depressing regularity over the years (think the Iraqi Oil-for-Food scandal).

This list also leaves aside long-standing issues such as bias against Israel in the U.N. Human Rights Council, misconduct by U.N. peacekeepers, and reports that the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) supports terrorism.

Western nations have long been frustrated over duplication, fragmentation, and low return on investment among U.N. funds, programs, and agencies (a May 2012 study by

economists William Easterly and Claudia Williamson assessing best and worst practices among aid agencies ranked U.N. agencies among the worst), but few countries have persistently sought to address these problems. That may finally be changing, thanks to budget constraints in donor countries. In recent months, 17 donor nations, including the U.S., have met to coordinate efforts to reshape the U.N. system to address corruption and make it less fragmented and more transparent and cost-effective.

Individual nations have also begun to take action. Perhaps the best example is the Multilateral Aid Review of 43 organizations, conducted by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development. The review found that nine multilateral aid agencies offered "poor value for money," including U.N. organizations such as UNESCO. DFID decided to stop providing core funding to four organizations and put four others on notice that funding may be stopped unless reforms are implemented. Alarmed by these efforts, senior officials of over 20 U.N. bodies met in January. They acknowledged that the "U.N. Common System has been called into question, and its governance and mechanisms challenged."

Unfortunately, the meeting was short on specific reforms. By far, the most detailed discussion centered on tweaking procedures for future meetings and developing "strong communication campaigns providing government representatives and lawmakers in our Member States with tools to justify to their constituents support of United Nations organizations." Specifically mentioned is using the U.N. Foundation to assist their efforts, which may explain their recent campaigns to protect U.N. funding in the U.S.

PR campaigns are not going to resolve the deep-seated problems within the U.N. and its affiliated organizations. The member states, particularly the U.S. which is the largest contributor to the U.N. system, need to conduct a rigorous examination and evaluation of individual U.N. agencies, funds, and programs to determine what aspects of the U.N. are effective and deserve continued funding and, even more importantly, which ones do not. The U.N.'s year so far doesn't bode well for how such a process might go.

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