

FLC 301/Fall 2001

Instructor: H. Kurthen

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United Nations Visit in New York City

by

Brian Dandenau and Kerry A. Adams (Team #3)

Our class visit of the United Nations Headquarters in New York City took place on November 9. The purpose of our visit was to take a tour of the UN itself and then to meet and talk with the former Pakistan Ambassador Ahmed Kamal, President of the UN Ambassadors Club.

1. The UN Headquarters

The UN in New York consists of four buildings and is the organizations headquarters. The UN was established in 1945 after the end of World War II. The UN Charter that signifies its birth was signed in San Francisco. Currently the UN has 189 member states, except for Switzerland and The Vatican. Kofi Annan (Ghana) has been the Secretary General of the organization since 1997. The six major components of the UN are: the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Secretariat, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice, and the Economic and Social Council.

The General Assembly is the most important pillar of the UN since all member states are represented in a quasi world forum or parliament for discussing matters of global importance. Currently there are 170 issues on the General Assembly's agenda. In order to address all of them efficiently, the General Assembly is divided into six committees (Political and Security Committee, Economic and Financial Committee, Social Humanitarian and Cultural Committee, Trusteeship Committee, Administrative and Budgetary Committee, and the Legal Committee).

The Security Council consists of five permanent members, the victors of WWII (U.S., U.K., China, Russia, France), and ten temporary members chosen by geographical regions. The main function of the Security Council is to maintain international peace and security by the most powerful nuclear arms states. Also, UN peacekeepers fall under the supervision of the Security Council.

The Secretariat is the area of the UN which the Secretary General (the chief administrative officer of the entire UN) administers. The people chosen for the Secretariat are international civil servants and must maintain strict neutrality while making decisions.

The Trusteeship Council provides for those countries without independence so that they may become sovereign states and join the UN. The UN has transformed 11 colonies into member states since its existence.

The International Court of Justice is located in The Hague, Holland. It represents the judicial branch of the UN, and its body consists of 15 judges elected into office. The ICJ is a court for nations rather than individuals; all cases involve matters between states.

The Economic and Social Council meets in New York and Geneva. Its purpose is to promote higher living standards and better human rights worldwide. There are 54 member states serving three-year terms, 18 new members are elected each year.

2. Discussion with former UN Ambassador

After our tour of the UN we had a discussion with former UN Ambassador Kamal from Pakistan. First we watched on the UN in-house video network a segment of the ongoing General Assembly's annual discussion of the "Dialogue Among Civilizations" resolution introduced by Iran and presented by its visiting President Mohammad Khatami. The basis of this discussion was to stress the importance of interaction between Islamic governments and secular countries, something very important particularly after the 9/11 events.

Ambassador Kamal first elaborated on the fact that the UN is not a government unto itself but rather a relatively weak club of 198 members, each with its own agenda and often separate and conflicting interests. He then answered our questions.

- Only 0.014% of the United States GNP is used to aid foreign countries. The UN set a goal for 0.8% of all developed contributing countries, however, few countries are close to that number with the exception of Scandinavian countries, Australia, and New Zealand. Now the average percentage of foreign aid as % of a country's GNP is only 0.25%.

- Against the official theory propagated in academia and the media, trade is often unfair and the rules are in favor of the already developed, rich, and powerful countries. For example, richer countries keep poorer countries from trading their cheaper goods by using tariffs and quotas. In the U.S. the average tariff on industrial goods is 3% but--because of a strong and traditional lobby--the tariff on textiles is 30%. Quotas allow only a given amount of a product to enter into a country. A quota is a NTB (non-tariff barrier) and illegal under GATT rules. Recently the U.S. promised to dismantle NTBs on Pakistani textile goods for Pakistan's help in the war on terrorism.

- The Ambassador outlined the UN's position on peacekeeping and interference into the sovereignty of other countries by force. The latter is only allowed according to the UN Charter under Article 51 for the purpose of self-defense and under Article 42 if the Security Council decides with a majority and without a veto that force can be used. UN peacekeeping is often hampered by the lack of funding and by the will of powerful Western nations to provide political support and share their military resources. The UN is based on loyalty of the world community--and if this loyalty is missing not much can be accomplished through the UN.

- The Ambassador thought that a majority of countries support the involvement of NGOs in UN organizations (such as ECOSOC) but powerful members of the Security Council (like the U.S. and the U.K.) disagree because they fear meddling of NGO's in their political agendas.

- The issue of women rights is more complex than often portrayed in media circles and by feminist pundits. It is not true that all non-Western cultures relegate women to a secondary citizen status. For example, countries like Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh had female Prime Ministers in the past. Who is the U.S. to point a finger at?

- The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is much more than a fight for control of land. Israel and particularly Jerusalem is a place where for over 2000 years three world religions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity), peoples, and their cultures have violently clashed but also learned to peacefully live together as equals. Every side involved in the conflict can provide many historical claims to the land. But one cannot settle the future with means and arguments of a historic past long gone. Nor is an occupying power, according to international law and the Geneva Convention, allowed to annex territory, to kill people without trial, or to transfer their own population into an occupied territory and build settlements. In the case of Jerusalem the number of Palestinians has been reduced from 50,000 to 10,000 as a result of oppressive Israeli policies. A solution is only in sight if one accepts the universality of human rights, of basic human freedoms, of the universal rule of law and unequivocally and impartially applies them to all people and all states. The UN passed many resolutions to end Israel's military occupation of Palestinian land, to stop illegal Jewish settlements in the occupied territories (West Bank/Gaza), end economic suffocation policies as well as human rights violations. But these resolutions were never implemented because Security Council members, in particular the U.S. vetoed their implementation. In the case of Jerusalem a solution is perhaps to give Palestinians and Israelis joint control OR to internationalize the city under UN trusteeship.

- Our class also discussed the September 11, 2001 events. What makes this event so unique for the U.S. is the fact that this was the first foreign "battle" on U.S. soil with a large number of victims since about 200 years. Often terrorism is thought of as an act of a crazy individual with a bomb or gun. However, in this case it was a group-based, rational, and well staged act without the use of significant individual weaponry-- simply based on a single-minded will and motivation, hard to detect or to fight. The community needs to find an answer, figure out and remove the causes of such a tragedy, find the culprits, and care for the victims. Of interest is that none of the 19 hijackers was an Afghani. The U.S. war in Afghanistan is not against those who did the attack (they are dead) but against those who most likely aided and abetted it, i.e. Osama BinLaden.

The origins and causes of the attack may be found in Saudi Arabia, where a U.S.-backed but undemocratic monarchy is contested by people who resent the sellout of cheap oil and the stationing of U.S. military forces on "holy" soil. Another cause is the undeclared air war and the economic sanctions of Iraq which seem to hurt the Iraqi people more than Saddam Hussein. The ongoing occupation, oppression, and violence of Palestinians and unwavering U.S. support of Israel is a third factor. Finally, one has to factor in Egypt and its long history of militant Islamism.

3. Student comment

One student was impressed by the unheard frankness of the discussion, in particularly by the former Ambassador's critique of U.S. price quotas against textile imports from Pakistan as unfair trade regulations hurting one of the poorest economies. The student felt that this argument was perhaps somewhat unfair and rather typical for those abroad who vehemently criticize U.S. policy. One should also consider the fact that--without the U.S. as the largest world importer--countries like Pakistan would be worse off. For example, only 7.7% of all imports into Pakistan originate in the U.S. but 21.8% of all exports of Pakistan go to the U.S. The student also thought that the U.S. does not need

to feel guilty for its over 200-year long economic success, starting with humble beginnings of colonists struggling for freedom and eventually leading to the most productive economy and powerful nation. Also, in contrast to the British colonial rule, which took away Pakistan's autonomy and restricted the rights of its people, the U.S. never challenged the independence of Pakistan and, regardless of export quotas, always has been a supporter of Pakistan.