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Reforms that will keep Annan busy

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UNITED Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan is in Malaysia just over a month after having won wide-ranging support from the 52nd General Assembly for his proposal to reform the United Nations.

It is a significant achievement for Annan, who assumed the position in January, as reform has been due for a long time. There has been, over the last few years, a growing consensus about the irrelevance of the United Nations, and doubt in its ability to function as a body that could care of the interests of the citizens of the world.

With about 50,000 professional and support staff, it was getting unwieldy. It was also getting too politicised, too bureaucratic and unable to deliver to those that needed its help most, its poor developing member states.

The UN was also in dire need of cost-cutting measures, as it had operated in near bankruptcy: its finances were not able to keep up with the demands for its services.

It was also perceived that the UN was either too accommodating or powerless when dealing with some major member countries.

But the Nov 12 endorsement by consensus the General Assembly gave of the reform package, after nearly two months of debates, was a major boost in preparing the United Nations for the challenges ahead.

The UN is now after all 52 years old, and the events of World War II that led to its formation had changed, so has the geo-political climate with the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Change - be it institutional or attitudinal - was a long time coming.

But reforming a body with 185 member countries is a complex one. While virtually all members recognise the need for significant changes in the way the UN is run, there has been less agreement as to what should be the nature and direction of those changes, and how to implement them. Each member has its own opinion, and as a result consensus is hard to come by. And when they do agree, the outcome may be watered down.

Annan came into office pledging his commitment to wide-ranging reform. In July, he submitted his reform package to the General Assembly. It was said to be the most far-reaching proposals on restructuring the UN ever submitted for consideration by the General Assembly.

They included the appointment of a Deputy Secretary-General, a US\$1 billion (RM3.8 billion) revolving fund to assure the organisation's solvency and a more focused and larger role by the General Assembly, especially in international peace and security matters.

With the endorsement of Annan's proposal, to whatever that falls within his powers, he would now be able to carry them out. But member states must still make decisions regarding the series of fundamental reform proposals made both by the Secretary-General and by the General Assembly working groups.

There were five working groups, dealing with strengthening the UN system; the reform of the Security Council; financial situation of the world body; agenda for development; and agenda for peace.

The reform package was on top of the measures Annan announced in March aimed at streamlining the United Nations secretariat, which included a 10 per cent cut in staffing, reduction in administrative cost by at least US\$200 million over the next few years and a proposed zero-growth budget; as well as the consolidation of departments to promote efficiency.

In fact, the 1998-1999 budget Annan presented reflected the first ever reduction in absolute terms of UN expenses.

"I think it is important that we demonstrate to ourselves and to the world that the United Nations is not only capable of reform, but is also determined to reform and render the organisation the effective organisation that it ought to be," Annan had said at the General Assembly.

In Kuala Lumpur, Annan will also bring the message that the United Nations still matters and deserves the full support of member nations.

"He will stress that the United Nations belong to each and every one of the member states," said Shashi Tharoor, Annan's executive assistant at the world body.

It would be an opportune time for this, as not only Annan will be having bilateral meetings with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, but he would also be in Kuala Lumpur during the Asean Informal Summit which begins today.

His visit would allow him to meet leaders of Asean to express his appreciation of the grouping's contribution to the world community.

Since all Asean members are also UN members, Annan would discuss with the leaders issues of common interest as well as to convey his vision for the world body in the 21st century.

Annan's assurance on the United Nations commitment to serve its members, regardless of influence or size, would be a very important message as there had been some expression of disenchantment of the world body. Dr Mahathir, for instance, had publicly been critical of it, saying that the UN, born from the tragedy of World War II, was out of touch with current realities.

His criticism was mainly levelled at the Security Council, where five nations which were victors of World War II, continued to wield tremendous influence even when some of them might not be as powerful as they were. The Security Council is entrusted with dealing with matters related to international peace and security.

Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States with their attendant veto powers have considerable say over the proceedings of the council, and there have been times when they exerted undue influence on matters that had little to do with the authorities of that council.

The removal of Annan's predecessor, Dr Boutros-Boutros Ghali of Egypt, was a case in point, where the permanent members flexed their muscles even when it was something not related to international peace and security.

While the UN practices democracy, there were many a time when one of the permanent five could frustrate the overwhelming majority by casting its veto.

Malaysia had also been frustrated with the United Nations' handling of certain issues, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, where bureaucratic red tape and much politicking resulted in massacre there.

Then there was also the seemingly nonchalant attitude of the United States, especially with regards to its arrears to the world body amounting to more than US\$1 billion, that led to the UN's current precarious financial position. And yet Washington continued to, at times, throw its weight around.

However, Tashoor said there were some realities within the United Nations, such as the influence of the permanent members in the Security Council, which could only be changed by members collectively. It was up to members to convince each other that a change was necessary for the greater good of the United Nations.

This is expected to be a difficult and protracted process as seen in the almost non-solution regarding the expansion of the Security Council from 15 members currently.

A working group has been discussing the issue of equitable representation and increase in security council membership, as well as issues relating to it for over two years. But yet there have not been any major breakthrough. It is currently perhaps the most politicised issue in the United Nations, and a resolution has yet in sight.

The questions of who would be the new permanent members and whether they would have veto powers like the existing five continue to be the stumbling blocks to a Security Council reform package acceptable to the bulk of the membership.

Tan Sri Razali Ismail, as president of the 51st General Assembly, forced the issue on the table by making a proposal that included increasing the council membership to 24 and asking permanent members to check the use of their vetoes. But that, like all other proposals, have had its detractors.

Compromises have to be sought and yet a significant outcome must be cobbled together before support could reach the required two-third majority. But most important, the permanent five must be convinced to go along with any reform proposal, lest they veto it.

Because of this, Annan is likely to stress the other aspects of the United Nations, less contentious perhaps, but with benefits to the citizens of the world especially those from developing countries.

The issues of development and the environment, major concerns for both developed and developing countries, are areas where the United Nations could play a role with relatively little politicking.

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