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UN must regain its purpose

REFORMING the United Nations (UN), beginning with regaining its original direction and dignity, will not be easy. The world body has been riddled with shortcomings and outright flaws which have weakened its functionality and purpose. What started as an international body to ensure peace after World War II has gradually been reduced to a congregation seemingly aimed at fault-finding and promotion of self-interest. Where the UN has gone wrong is an old issue. Why it went wrong has been keenly debated. What is left is to rectify the situation. This is the point where action will be more necessary than words.

In principle, the UN was conceived as a democratic body. Its members - be they in Western Europe, North America, the remote parts of Africa or the South Pacific - deserve equal treatment. It is unfair for the industrialised world to have greater voting powers, usually at the expense of the poorest nations' economic interests in the Bretton Woods institutions. Likewise, it is unfair for nuclear powers in the UN Security Council to veto moves against nuclear testing at will. Ironically, it is in efforts to preserve democracy that the UN first strayed from its original course. When its decisions became vested in the hands of a few economic and military powers, many of its members started to doubt its purpose.

Malaysia has time and again spoken against the inequality. It has on numerous instances questioned the composition of the Security Council, arguing that times have changed so much that just having 15 member nations, five of which are permanent members, is no longer reflective of the present world situation. Malaysia has made several calls for membership of the Security Council to be enlarged to 20 and that Germany and Japan be included as permanent members. A better proposition would be to transfer the Security Council's role in decision-making to the General Assembly since the latter comprises all members of the UN and the decisions taken there would be more democratic. That would be fairer since several recent conflicts in the world have shown the Security Council is prone to lapses in fair handling of disputes. It was fast to act against Iraq over the attack on Kuwait but slow and indecisive in responding to the Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict. In the latter case, critics had said it was because of the absence of economic incentives among the Security Council members in the Balkan region.

In financial matters, reforms are urgently needed too as the Bretton Woods institutions have increasingly become tools for the rich and powerful nations, at the expense of the needy poor countries. Furthermore, with the distribution of wealth having shifted from merely being concentrated in the West to other parts of the world, decision-making powers in institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund should change to reflect that as well. These financial bodies should strive to help poor countries to be self-reliant, instead of the present stance of making it difficult for them to progress by imposing sometimes unreasonable conditions.

The UN's new Secretary General, Mr Kofi Annan, has a lot to do. He has promised a package of reforms with the commencement of this year's General Assembly, starting with the mending of ties with the US. With improved relations, Annan carries with him hopes of convincing the US Congress to agree to Washington paying up the US\$1.3 billion (US\$1 = RM2.49) it owes

the world body. For the US, it is inconceivable that it has managed to avoid paying its dues while continuing to exert so much influence in the world body. More so when nations that have been regularly contributing have often have had their voices drowned out.

Annan and his men at the UN Secretariat do not have a choice. The reforms must be undertaken and undertaken now. For the wealthy members, the UN may not mean much, but for the smaller and poorer ones, it is still their best hope for a better tomorrow. As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had told the General Assembly, while there is much that is not right with the UN, it remains the only truly international organisation where the voices of the small nations can be heard.

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