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Let democracy prevail in the world

THE United Nations must change, for its own sake, and for the sake of a better world. If it is left to drift in uncertain and chaotic waters, mankind will descend faster into the abyss where might is right and injustice rampant. The UN has lost its way, as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad aptly put it in his address at the UN General Assembly on Thursday, and the concept of global multilateralism and collective responsibility eroded.

It is time for UN members, particularly the major powers, to stop their lip service about reforming the UN. Real change can only come if the major powers are committed and willing to allow democracy and human rights to flourish in the UN, the very forum from which some of them pass judgment on the status of democracy, freedom and human rights in others. Perhaps the most glaringly undemocratic practice of the UN is the veto system. Dr Mahathir has rightly called for it to be changed and ultimately dismantled to allow for decisions to be based on majority vote.

An effective UN is central to the existence of a multi-lateral world order. This much is increasingly accepted, even by the five permanent members of the Security Council with veto power. A restructured council could stir up a hornet's nest as to which countries deserve inclusion. Nonetheless, this has to be part of the reform agenda. The overhaul must begin in the top decision-making authority, where a more equitable distribution of powers and responsibilities should be accompanied by a more equal sharing of the UN's budget and expenses.

There is room for some optimism when US President George W. Bush, who had earlier snubbed the UN as irrelevant for its failure to sanction the Iraqi invasion, asked for the world body's help in rebuilding the country. Bush seems to have realised, belatedly, that the UN is of use after all. It may be too much to hope for, but having experienced the difficulties of occupying and restoring peace in Iraq, Washington is now perhaps wiser to the perils of unilateralism and pre-emption, and the advantages of multilateralism.

If the UN is bypassed and wars are launched by strong nations against weaker ones with impunity, international law and order would crumble. Without multilateral intervention and an effective international institution to nip them in the bud, small wars can draw in others and become much more destructive over time. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has sowed the seeds of larger conflicts. In this, there is a disturbing historical parallel in the failure of the League of Nations - set up after the First World War - to prevent aggression against weak states by stronger countries in the 1930s.

When it was formed after the Second World War over five decades ago, the UN was structured to avoid the pitfalls of the League of Nations. Too far ahead of its time, the League had collapsed from competing unilateralisms and national interests. The UN's noble mission to build a more peaceful world is as crucial today as when it was first founded. It cannot afford to fail man-kind because, with weapons of mass destruction and a looming clash of civilisations, the alternative to world peace is too frightening to contemplate. Reform must therefore not be delayed and the Permanent Five must get the process started.