

24/09/2003

This lion needs sharper teeth

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NEW York has more than the United Nations and President George W. Bush, stressed Blair, an old Yankees fan as we reviewed Bush's tough and unyielding speech at the General Assembly yesterday. We laughed over a quiet dinner at an Upper East Side restaurant with her husband Bob and my daughter.

Basically, Bush said again that he had made no mistake in invading Iraq and planning for post-war security and reconstruction for that unfortunate nation. Privately, all know that the United States did not anticipate the scope and duration of the raging guerilla war against the Anglo-American occupation.

Bush would make no concessions to demands that the US share authority to run Iraq, though he was asking France, Germany and Russia to break an impasse over sharing peacekeeping and construction costs.

Tomorrow, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will deliver his last speech as Prime Minister at the UN and I expect he will mince no words on what he thinks and expects of the organisation - to bring it into the 21st century with the present world order, not reflecting the one which has faded.

Dr Mahathir lacks no friends here - Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General, and, surprise, surprise, even the neo-conservatives behind Pax Americana would agree with him, of course, for different objectives.

Autumn in New York has arrived early for the UN. The leaves haven't fallen yet, but the turning of the seasons has cast a shadow on the famous flag-draped address at the UN Plaza. Reform is in the air, carried with an extra bite by the dry wind coming in off the East River.

There is a pervasive feeling that this much-loved and much-maligned institution might not be able to make it through the winter.

Not quite - just imagine a world without the UN. But the sense of urgency isn't merely the sentimental imaginings of a jetlagged correspondent and former diplomat at the UN. The 58th annual session of the General Assembly, which I am here to cover, has a packed agenda.

Annan has written to the leaders of all 191 member countries to attend the heads of government meeting, following his scathing annual report of shortcomings and structural defects that badly need fixing.

Reform has been clinging like a bad odour to the stuffed shirts of the UN bureaucracy for at least 10 years. The fact that the world body lacks democracy only brings up a yawn. So does the notion that the UN is caught in a pincer between the small nations, whose voices remain unheeded, and the big nations, who bellow about its irrelevance.

This year, however, in a ringing departure from the defensive posture of his predecessors, Annan has jangled a note of crisis. There is a rare unity on the floor of the Assembly, but it is a unity in discontent.

Here in New York, even the taxi drivers, whose nationalities are almost as diverse as the membership of the UN, agree that the organisation must reform. Clearly, world government concocted by and slanted towards the victors of the Second World War with a membership of 51 countries in 1945 is unrepresentative and outmoded under today's geopolitical realities.

It is like a court of ageing, hereditary nobles trying to lead an awakened proletariat. One way or the other, some sort of revolution is bound to come. And it must come, no matter what it takes and how long we have to wait.

All along, however, talk of root-and-branch change hasn't gone beyond

its simulcast translation and hansom-keeping into the five languages of the UN. Even Annan, in his annual report to the General Assembly, assails it for prattling on in "repetitive and sterile" debates that are bunkum to most of the world's people.

All the big decisions are made in the restricted huddle of the Security Council, with its five veto-wielding permanent members and 10 rotating ones, on the jackpot occasions when it comes out in agreement.

The split between big and small, between the lofty chairs of the Security Council and the low stools of the General Assembly was evidenced again last week with the debate over Israel's attempt to get rid of Yasser Arafat.

On Friday, the General Assembly voted overwhelmingly on a resolution demanding that Israel not deport or threaten the safety of the Palestinian leader after the US vetoed a similar text in the Security Council. The tally was 133 votes with four against and 15 abstentions. The four "Nos" were the US, Israel, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands.

Without a trace of irony, or of recognition of the pendulum swing of world opinion, Israel complained of the one-sidedness of the resolution. The two island states added their grains of sand to the power of the US-backed Israeli argument and the powerlessness of the General Assembly, whose decisions are not binding. All it can do is to pump up the volume to a point where even Tel Aviv and Washington might hear.

In his statement to the emergency session on the vote, Malaysia's Permanent Representative Datuk Rastam Mohd Isa, speaking on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, said that there had been a clear attempt in the Security Council to divert attention, by labelling Arafat a terrorist and calling for his removal, from the urgent issue at hand, namely Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian land and the humiliation of the Palestinian people.

"The Sept 16 decision of the Security Council constituted a failure to send the correct signal to Israel. The Council, in failing to uphold the rule of law, left the General Assembly as the last bastion of hope for the Palestinian people," he added.

So there it is: the nub of the matter is the unbridgeable gulf between the minority Security Council and the majority General Assembly. The UN is nothing if not for the global legitimacy that it confers, which suffers when decision-making is shackled by a powerful few. Obviously, the first thing to do is to remake and enlarge the Council.

That is a lot easier said than done, even by the hyper-refined interlocutors at the UN. Almost everyone agrees that Japan and Germany belong up there with the highest and the mightiest. But won't China, in the case of the former, and France object? India should deserve a place but won't this send Pakistan into a rage? What about Mexico and Argentina, if Brazil is chosen for elevation? And what if Nigeria is promoted instead of Africa peers South Africa or Egypt? What of Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim and fourth most populous nation?

I hope Annan has created enough of a stir for a consensus to begin overhauling the Security Council. It will be a Sisyphean task, for none of the permanent five - the US, China, Russia, France and Britain - is likely to give up an inch of its pride of place upon the world stage. In the meantime, the General Assembly will be left to its old tricks, which is to make as much noise as it possibly can.

If Security Council disconnect has damaged UN credibility and legitimacy, then the US decision to invade Iraq without a UN mandate has left it in tatters - as the bomb blast at its compound in Baghdad, killing 22 including top envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello, on Aug 19 attests. Another bomb exploded in the UN parking lot on Monday, killing the bomber and an

Iraqi policeman.

I don't think the UN's neutrality and good faith have been attacked on such a scale, even by terrorists, in a country it has sallied forth to rescue.

Dag Hammarskjold, the UN's second secretary-general, once said that the UN was not created to take humanity to heaven but to save it from hell. This deliverance is the moral basis for multilateralism, after the arms races, military bloc-building and balance-of-power intrigues that had led to the Second World War.

In world peace, the multilateralism that only the UN can muster is not just a means but an end. It will thus get through the winter, as plodding as ever, because it is the only way to achieve anything resembling international law and order.

The Bush administration has given belated but token recognition to the necessity of UN auspices in the reconstruction of Iraq. The US might be able to unilaterally wage war, but it cannot act alone to make peace. For peace to take hold, the UN has to provide the necessary degree of multipolarity in a unipolar world.

Before they leave the Big Apple, the world's luminaries should give Annan a mandate to form a council of eminent persons to reinvent the UN into a forum where global politics can find a more inclusive legitimacy in this century.

The UN must be repackaged and varnished with the gloss of objective politics and diplomacy. The UN, the US and European Union must make emerging Asian dynamism - the "new powers", if you like - feel welcome. Otherwise, I will be nervous about the future of world peace in the years ahead or even sooner.