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UN needs urgent reform to be relevant to today's world

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IN the words of Kofi Annan the United Nations does not reflect the world as it exists today. The Secretary-General, in his report on Sept 8, 2003, challenged the world body to undertake radical reforms.

The challenge from Annan comes just as the world body begins its 58th General Assembly this week on the banks of the East River. But the call for reform is nothing new.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has argued for reforms on several occasions. In his address to the UN Assembly in 1996, Dr Mahathir had said that the organisation itself remains distant and removed from the aspirations of the "peoples of the UN" which it is supposed to promote and protect. He had pointed out that it needs to change "reflecting a more equitable sharing of political and economic power".

Annan, in his speech at the UN Assembly, said: "...in the eyes of your peoples the difficulty of reaching agreement does not excuse your failure to do so. If you want the Council's decisions to command greater respect, particularly in the developing world, you need to address the issue of its composition with greater urgency".

The UN Secretary-General reminded leaders that the composition of the Council has been on the agenda for over a decade. While virtually all members agree that the Council should be enlarged, there is yet no agreement on the details.

He argued that the Security Council must be enlarged with members added to the group of 10 elected nations that serve the two-year terms, and the group of five permanent members that hold veto power - US, Britain, France, China and Russia.

The General Assembly needs to remake itself so that it does not simply pass "lowest common denomination" nostrums, Annan said pointing out that "we started with 51 member states and we are now 191 member states ...but the structure of the council has not changed".

The Secretary-General seems to be echoing Dr Mahathir. The Prime Minister had told the 51st General Assembly that "the world has changed. It is not the world of the immediate post World War II that we have today".

In the same vein French President Jacques Chirac spoke of the urgent need to remedy "some of its blatant shortcomings" adding that member states must take matters "forward without delay, and put an end to the damage caused by stalemate over reforms".

Chirac stressed that "it is essential to its legitimacy that its membership reflect the state of the world. It must be enlarged to include new permanent members, for it needs the presence of major countries".

Chirac said France, as one of the five permanent members with veto power, was thinking of Germany and Japan, in addition to some other leading countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. He said the Council also needs additional elected countries in order to make the Council more representative.

Currently, not only is the Security Council an antiquated relic of the Cold War, the veto power is undemocratic. Calling for the strengthening of the Council's authority, Chirac said the chief responsibility for the maintenance of peace and security lies with the Security Council and as such the five permanent members must take up discussion on the reforms with "general interest in mind".

"No one is entitled to arrogate to himself the right to utilise it unilaterally and preventively," the French President said with obvious reference to the US-led invasion of Iraq without Security Council approval.

When Dr Mahathir spoke of "the systematic abuse of power by the major countries has continued", he could well have been describing events leading up to Iraq's invasion, but the fact is that he had made the observations in his address to the UN in 1996.

He had noted that even then major powers continued to disregard "multilateralism with its inherent qualities of mutual respect and shared interests".

It is the same UN Assembly and world body that the US President George W. Bush had said risked becoming "irrelevant" if it did not support the US in its invasion of Iraq.

But now with things turning horribly bad in Iraq, Washington wants the world body to assist and urged the UN to "move forward" with stabilising and rebuilding the scarred country.

Ignoring the views and will of the majority of the world's population was blatant but now Washington wants the UN to assist in Iraq where the situation is deteriorating by the day. It wants the world, including those who opposed the invasion, to contribute to rebuilding the country.

It wants assistance from the world community to help it out of the mess - a mess that is of its own making. Washington is not prepared to admit that it made "mistakes". It is not prepared to make any concessions. On the other hand Bush told the assembly that the US-led invasion of Iraq was the right thing to do, something that the US and its allies did without the explicit approval of the UN.

And Annan said this is something that the UN Security Council must consider ...how to deal with "the possibility that individual states may use force "pre-emptively" against perceived threats. With increasing evidence that the invasion was launched with lies there is increased anger. And the anti-US sentiment around the world is growing.

A Brazilian, who used to holiday in the US each year, said she has changed her plans.

"I do not plan to go to the US anymore. I do not like their policies and neither do I like their bullying and arrogance."

These attitudes, arrogance and bullying, had been recognised by Bush in his election campaign. He had said, "If we're an arrogant nation, they'll resent us". That is exactly what is happening now. Bush had also pointed out that "If we're a humble nation but strong, they'll welcome us".

He and his White House team have forgotten the second part of his statement or was it just articulated for the campaign and to win votes? Bush remains unrepentant and ignoring the will and majority view of the world's population was not the right thing to do - certainly not in accordance with democracy that the White House itself preaches.

The democratic principles must be practised, respected and adhered to in decision making at the highest level - that includes the UN Security Council which must be reformed to reflect the changed world environment.