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UN, Iraq and the Blair-dy Bushit

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EVERY serious journalist would fancy a chance to be assigned to cover the United Nations. It's a chance not every journalist would get. Here at the New Straits Times, for example, fewer than a handful of practising journalists can boast of having covered the UN General Assembly (UNGA).

It does not mean that these journalists are better than others. And it does nothing detrimental to a journalist's career if he never gets the chance to go to the UN.

But all the same, every serious, mainstream journalist would like that chance. Like every mountain climber wishes to scale the world's highest peak.

It's good for the CV. Good for the journalist's massive ego too.

And why not? The UN is the Everest of the world's multilateral organisations. With some 200 countries as members, its meetings are colossal in characteristics and importance.

Heads of state and government address the UNGA. The future of the modern world has been decided many times by it; the Security Council completed some of the most intricate diplomacies in its corridors of power.

Bloodbaths and wars have been averted in that august house.

And when a journalist writes a report from the UN, the dateline he's to use when starting his article is not "New York, Sunday", it's "The United Nations, Sunday".

Big-time thrill ride, really. I remember the first time I was assigned to cover the UN for the Business Times. I felt like I'd struck gold, like I'd arrived.

This was 1989. Boutros-Boutros Ghali was Secretary-General of the UN and the world was - as the world was before 9/11, and before the US aggression in Iraq this month - still a safe and sane place to live in.

Despite the Cold War too.

Palestine and Apartheid were the biggest issues then, and so were the long-standing claims affecting Kashmir and Cyprus. Bosnia- Herzegovina was hardly heard of, the EU did not exist, and Saddam Hussein was not a household name in the US.

Even after all these years, I remember how mesmerised I was by the UN, with the structure of its building (which was nothing spectacular, really), the steps leading to the building, and the hundreds of poles bearing member countries' flags in the compound.

We found the pole with the Malaysian flag and looked up proudly, softly rendering the Negara-ku.

That year Tun Ghafar Baba, then the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, was to deliver his first - and only - address to the UNGA.

Datuk Abu Hassan Omar, the Foreign Minister then, was the accompanying minister.

I could tell that even Tun Ghafar was excited about being there. He did really well too. He delivered his address in English and later gave a press conference to the world's media at the lobby.

The second time I covered the UN was four years later. It was no less significant, personally and for the nation.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad addressed the General Assembly as Malaysia waged war against Serbia's ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

That year the Non-Aligned Movement countries met on the sidelines during

the UNGA, and so did the Organisation of Islamic Conference countries. The UN was the place for such things.

Not any more.

What President George W. Bush of the US and Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain did on March 20 this year was to bring down the sanctity of the UN and reduce it to zilch.

The UN was never perfect. Countries and governments have disregarded its wishes before, with Israel being the biggest culprit.

And permanent members of the UN Security Council have used veto powers to make a mockery of democracy within the UN too. Washington vetoed against allowing UN peacekeeping forces from keeping peace in Palestine. Britain did the Bosnians in by forcing them to disarm (and thus allowing the Serbs to commit their atrocities with as little resistance as possible).

But to defy the UN like Bush and Blair did was unexpected. It's Blair-dy Bushit. No serious journalist should now want to cover the UN, as it has become a big joke.

And if it is a foretaste of things to come, as Paul Krugman the economist said in his comment published by the NST the day before the war on Iraq, then we should all be very frightened.