

DOUGLASS CASSEL
CENTER FOR CIVIL AND HUMAN RIGHTS
301 NOTRE DAME LAW SCHOOL
Notre Dame, Indiana USA 46556
(574) 631-7895
Doug.Cassel@nd.edu

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“Bolton’s UN Debut: Falling Flat”

We can now declare the winners and losers in last week’s United Nations summit of more than 150 world leaders. Count United States Ambassador John Bolton – and his country – among the losers. And list human rights – in some ways at least – among the winners.

Amid charges that he can be nasty and bullies subordinates, Bolton was unable to gain Senate confirmation earlier this year. He limped into the UN only one month ago on the crutch of a recess appointment by President Bush.

On a personal level, UN and foreign diplomats were pleasantly surprised. Bolton did not grab them by the throat and choke them. He worked long hours and smiled a lot.

On a policy level, however, Bolton thought he could heave around America’s considerable weight. Only two weeks before the world leaders convened, he proposed more than 400 changes to their draft summit document.

One of his principal targets was the UN commitment to alleviate world poverty. Five years ago at the Millennium summit, world leaders agreed to cut global poverty in half and to meet other anti-poverty goals by the year 2015. Yet last month Bolton proposed to eliminate any reference to these Millennium Development goals.

Three years ago in Monterey, Mexico, the world’s wealthy nations, including the US, agreed to make “concrete efforts” toward a target of contributing 0.7% of their gross national products to development aid to poor countries. At less than 0.2%, the US does not come close to meeting this goal; among affluent nations, only Italy gives a lower percentage than we do.

Last month Bolton proposed to scrap any reference to the Monterey Consensus as well.

The result of his ham-handedness was a double defeat. First, he did not get what he proposed; on the contrary, he was publicly overruled by Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice and President Bush. Second, he provoked so much distrust among developing nations that they blocked or watered down UN management reforms they might otherwise have accepted.

The President’s speech left Bolton’s bluster behind. The US, Bush told the other summit leaders, remains “committed to the Millennium Development goals. This is an ambitious agenda that includes cutting poverty and hunger in half, ensuring that every boy and girl in the world has access to primary education and halting the spread of AIDS – all by 2015.”

And recalling the Monterey pledge to increase aid to nations that undertake necessary reforms, the President “call[ed] on all the world’s nations to implement the Monterey Consensus.”

Welcome as these last-minute policy reversals are, they came too late to undo the damage done by Bolton. Among other reforms diluted by developing nations, distrustful of any measure that might appear to enhance American power, was a proposal to replace the widely discredited UN Human Rights Commission with a new, more credible Human Rights Council. The summit document punted this proposal to the UN General Assembly, where the proposed reform will be on life support.

On the other hand, despite Bolton’s bungling, the summit produced a number of net gains for human rights. Three are especially noteworthy.

First, the summit leaders resolved to double the regular budget of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights over the next five years. This is an area where more money can make a difference. Much good work in investigating and exposing human rights violations, and pressing for relief, is done by human rights experts working for the High Commissioner. But they are grossly underfunded. More funds will enable them to do more good work in more countries.

Second, for the first time in history, the world leaders declared that the international community, through the UN, “has the responsibility ... to help protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.” Where peaceful means fail, they recognized that the Security Council may authorize force under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

This is an important step forward. The UN Charter expressly empowers the Security Council to authorize the use of force to protect international peace and security, but not to protect human rights. While the UN has occasionally used force to safeguard human rights, its legal authority to do so has been challenged. The new language strengthens both the international law case and the political odds for intervening against atrocities.

Finally, the summit leaders recognized the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, developed by UN expert Francis Deng, as an “important international framework” to protect people displaced from their homes by war or disaster. Following these guidelines would go far to ease the suffering of the displaced, who are among the world’s most vulnerable population groups.

So the 2005 World Summit produced useful progress. Bolton did not burn everything in his path. The summit yielded, for example, a ringing condemnation of terrorism “in all its forms and manifestations, committed by whomever, wherever and for whatever purpose.”

But it might have achieved more, much more, had a more able diplomat led the US delegation. Never before has there been so much momentum for UN reform, but so little understanding of how to make it happen.

Doug Cassel’s commentaries are broadcast Wednesdays during the 1:00 p.m. hour of the Worldview program. All views expressed are the personal views of the author and not necessarily those of Notre Dame Law School, the Center for Civil and Human Rights or Chicago Public Radio.