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“Human Rights: Candor from the Departing UN Secretary-General”

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, a decent man, is tasked to administer an inherently indecent – albeit indispensable – organization. The UN is run by and for 192 governments. They concede their Secretary-General little more than a soap box and leeway to fill in the details of what they decide. The lofty goals of the UN are often done in by the petty agendas of its members.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the field of human rights, which Mr. Annan calls one of the UN’s three pillars, along with development and security.

Last Friday, in a farewell address to the human rights community in New York, the Secretary-General, who leaves office at the end of this month, felt free to voice an unusually frank assessment of UN underperformance on human rights.

“I know that ten years ago,” he told the human rights advocates, “many of you were close to giving up on any hope that an organization of governments, many of which are themselves gross violators of human rights, could ever function as an effective human rights defender.”

No wonder: a decade ago the UN was fresh from fiddling while Rwanda and Yugoslavia burned. In 1994 nearly a million Tutsis fell victim to genocide while the UN – under US pressure – withdrew its paltry force from Rwanda. In 1995 seven thousand Bosnian Muslim men were slaughtered under the nose of UN peacekeepers in Srebrenica.

Annan is haunted by those memories: he was in charge of UN peacekeeping operations at the time. But then as now, he was not really “in charge”; his role as a UN official was to manage what governments decided. And they decided not to lift a finger against genocide.

Since then we have had the benefit of ten years of service by a Secretary-General who lists human rights among his “priorities.” Does the UN now do better in protecting human rights?

“I fear,” confessed Annan, “the answer may be No. ...” Rather than follow the pattern of departing leaders who laud the achievements of their organization, Annan chose to lay out “what is really needed.”

He identified four goals – each one a tall order.

First is to “give real meaning to the principle of ‘Responsibility to Protect’.” Adopted by the UN World Summit last year, this principle declares that State sovereignty cannot stand in the way of

action to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing or crimes against humanity. If a government fails to protect its own people, the UN has the right – indeed the duty -- to step in.

Fine words, but tell them to the people of Darfur. They are dying by the tens of thousands, while the UN fails to mount an effective intervention.

Second, we must “put an end to impunity.” Leaders responsible for atrocities must be punished. But long after the war in Yugoslavia, two top suspects – former Bosnian Serb leaders Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic – remain fugitives from the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. NATO has the capacity, but not enough will to capture them.

Similarly, the world now has an International Criminal Court. But a year and a half after the crimes in Darfur were referred to the Court, no one has been indicted, let alone brought to justice.

Third, said Annan, we need an anti-terrorism strategy that respects human rights.

He especially condemned secret prisons, to which even the Red Cross is denied access. Ever the diplomat, Annan refrained from saying what everyone in the audience knew: that only the US publicly asserts the right to maintain these mockeries of law. Although President Bush recently declared that we no longer keep anyone in secret prisons, he stopped short of committing not to use them again.

This brought Annan close to abandoning his diplomatic fig leaf. “Leading promoters of human rights,” he warned, “undermine their own influence when they fail to live up to these principles.”

Finally, he called on the UN to clean its human rights house. This year the UN replaced its discredited Human Rights Commission with a new, supposedly improved Human Rights Council. Among other reforms, the new Council meets more frequently and plans to review the human rights performance of its own member governments.

But so far the Council, said Annan, has “clearly not justified the hopes” placed in it. Risking offense to Arab and Muslim UN members, Annan criticized the Council’s “disproportionate focus on violations by Israel. Not that Israel should be given a free pass. ... But the Council should give the same attention to grave violations committed by other states as well.”

So far the Council has failed to do so. In its first six months it has called four special sessions -- three of them focused on Israel. Only this week did the Council finally hold a special session on Darfur.

Kofi Annan is an admirable man. When he leaves, however, the reality will remain that member governments – not any Secretary-General – run the UN. Acting US Ambassador John Bolton also steps down this month. Americans must press Washington to name a new Ambassador to the UN who, unlike Bolton, can work with other governments and not alienate them needlessly. Only so can we hope for a UN better able to pursue Annan’s goals for human rights, development and security.

Doug Cassel’s commentaries are broadcast, usually on Wednesdays, during the noon hour of the Worldview program on Chicago Public Radio, 91.5 FM. Views expressed are 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.