

WHAT ROLE FOR THE UNITED NATIONS IN RESPONDING TO TERRORISM?

by

Dick Thornburgh

The United Nations and its Secretary-General have a significant opportunity to justify their recent receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize. The terrorist attacks upon the United States on September 11 of this year impose new responsibilities upon both the world community and the organization it has fashioned to preserve the peace. The immediate task is, of course, to root out, once and for all, those bent upon terroristic acts, together with those who would provide them shelter and support. There is, as noted by UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson, "an immediate responsibility on all governments of the world to bring [these] perpetrators to justice." No less a responsibility is imposed upon the UN itself.

Make no mistake about it, the acts undertaken on September 11 were not attacks upon the U.S. alone. They pose a potential threat to the entire civilized world, no part of which is immune from similar attacks by those, motivated by fanatic beliefs and an unfathomable hatred, who have no respect for innocent human life, including their own. The more than 5,000 victims of these attacks were not members of any military group nor had they any particular political agenda or affiliation. They were men, women, and children of many races, came from many countries, practiced many faiths and most had families who have been deprived of loved ones on no rational basis whatsoever. These characteristics are painfully evident from a reading of the newspaper biographies of the victims which have been published on an almost daily basis since the event.

It is abundantly clear that the United Nations must play a key role in dealing with this phenomenon. True, the UN has already manifested its concerns and its commitment in words. Swift action by the Security Council unanimously condemned these acts. The Council called

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upon all states to work together urgently to bring to justice their perpetrators, organizers, and sponsors, stressing that anyone who aids, supports or harbors them should be held accountable as well. The same day, the General Assembly echoed this position by a resolution stating that “those responsible for aiding, abetting or harboring the perpetrators, organizers and sponsors of such acts will be held accountable.”

These resolutions were, of course, preceded two years ago by specific Security Council action calling for the surrender of Al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden and the imposition of sanctions against Afghanistan’s Taliban pending their handover of this arch-terrorist. And the Security-General’s recent re-appointment of a special representative on Afghanistan has properly increased the organization’s focus upon this area at the highest level.

But condemnation of terrorism must include condemnation of the terrorists as well. And that means identifying, apprehending, and bringing to justice those individuals responsible for these acts and those who have aided, abetted, harbored, or sheltered them. By all accounts, verified by evidence presented by the United States to members of the coalition assembled to seek justice in this matter, the perpetrators were indeed directed by Osama bin Laden and identification of many of his henchmen has already been made and shared with coalition members as well.

Because this international fugitive is sheltered by the Taliban in Afghanistan, which refuses to surrender him, the coalition has undertaken military action there. The United States, in the proper exercise of its self-defense rights under Article 51 of the UN Charter, has taken the lead, understandably, in the military effort, but requires and deserves the support of all member nations. Similarly, worldwide support must be forthcoming to interrupt the flow of funds needed to support these illegal operations. Conventions and treaties proscribing money-laundering activities must be vigorously enforced by all signatories. To translate the words of all UN resolutions, conventions, and treaties into action in support of their sentiments must be a prime goal of the Secretary-General and his administration

These *are* proper roles for the UN, and those members who choose to look the other way run the risk of being next on the hit list of such mindless acts as were visited upon the United States in September. Any lack of resolve is an open invitation to the world’s terrorist network.

At the same time, vast humanitarian challenges exist in Afghanistan, thanks to its leaders’ fanatic preoccupation with terrorist activities at the expense of providing a decent society and standard of living to its citizens. With winter coming on, the potential for a humanitarian disaster is high. It is estimated that some 6,000,000 Afghans are currently in need of aid. And reports of Taliban interference with relief efforts further compound the atrocities they have already committed in the name of their beliefs.

Efforts by the World Food Program and other international agencies must proceed and must command full support by member nations as a means of underscoring the fact that our differences are not with the Afghan people, but with those leaders who have betrayed their own people as well as the cause of humanity.

When, as it must, the threat of Osama bin Laden and his Taliban hosts is removed from the Afghan landscape, a vast job of reconstruction must be undertaken. Here the UN's role will be crucial. President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell have indicated their desire that the UN should play a leading role in this effort and pledged large-scale aid in the reconstruction of this embattled country, in furtherance, incidentally, of sizable relief efforts already undertaken by their administration.

The need for the UN's leadership is manifest in the restoration of physical, political, and economic infrastructure. The good offices of the Secretary-General and his aides may also be required in the delicate process of reconciliation of rival factions and the marshaling of member states interests to help fashion a new Afghan framework for the peaceful conduct of that country's business and its restoration to full membership in the world community.

Lately, an additional potential terrorist weapon appears to have surfaced in the United States and elsewhere. While no connection to terrorist groups has been definitively established, cases of anthrax disease have recurred with too much frequency to be treated as sheer coincidence. While investigations continue to determine the actual genesis of the offending spores and whether their presence is indeed connected to any terrorist movement, their very presence is a grim reminder of the threat that could be posed to civilization by biological weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.

Here the UN has a role as well. The World Health Organization has already made known its support of national public health efforts to investigate, treat, and inform the public. At the same time it is imperative, for example, that UN efforts to renew its suspended inspections of facilities such as those in Iraq known to be capable of producing such weapons be undertaken with dispatch so as to reassure the world that these facilities cannot be utilized in future similar undertakings.

Finally, the UN must complete work on the new comprehensive anti-terrorism treaty being drafted by the General Assembly's Ad Hoc Committee on Terrorism. The draft form of the treaty would, among other things, make it clear that "an act of terrorism involving innocent civilians and civilian targets cannot be considered a political offense," thus removing such offenders from protection against extradition requirements. This is an important change, as noted by Dr. Rohan Perera, Chairman of the Ad Hoc Committee, "If you target innocent civilians by the use of indiscriminate violence, then motivation does not justify your crime."

The sooner such a convention is adopted and comes into force the better. And we should ensure that every member nation ratifies such a treaty as well as the other treaties and conventions adopted to combat terrorism around the world. Non-signatory nations should be identified as the international pariahs they truly are in the face of today's threat to all the world's population. Moreover, careful monitoring should take place to ensure that the obligations imposed by these undertakings are actually carried out by their signatories.

In the final analysis, the anti-terrorist effort is but one more chapter in the continuing struggle to utilize the UN Charter adopted over half a century ago to substitute the rule of law for

the rule of force. Terrorists, to be sure, represent a new and, in many ways, more sinister manifestation of the impulse to violent acts designed to disrupt world stability. But our resolve against these individuals and their networks must be no less than we have shown against nations bent upon similarly destructive missions.

The United Nations' fulfillment of its responsibilities in the wake of terrorist attacks will do more than justify the world's recognition of the organization and its leader, Secretary-General Kofi Annan, for their leadership by receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize. It will enhance the status of the rule of law and pave the way for more democratic government and greater respect for human rights around the world. This, in turn, can help provide the stability necessary to create a climate for economic growth and a better quality of life for all the world's people.

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