

Comment: Ban has lost a great opportunity

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THE United Nations (UN) is completely out of touch and stuck in a "time warp" with "practices, attitudes and approaches that were abandoned 30 years ago in much of the rest of the world", then United States permanent representative John Bolton told The Daily Telegraph last year.

My year-long stint as special adviser to Kofi Annan in the UN Ethics office gave me an opportunity to observe, at close quarters, the world body at work. I was appalled at the systems and procedures in use that, if applied elsewhere, would spell instant disaster.

It is not surprising that the UN is what it is today: An organisation that barely meets minimum international standards of service delivery and yet is not averse to preaching the virtues of transparency and accountability, ethical behaviour and efficiency.

Reforming the UN has been a priority with every secretary-general. Literally, hundreds of reform proposals have been made over the years, and have remained in the endless queue. In the nature of life at Turtle Bay, which is where the UN secretariat is located in New York city, they will never see the light of day.

No secretary-general has been more reform-driven than Annan, who completed his 10 years in December last year. His many proposals, as articulated in his report "In Larger Freedom" to member states in March 2005, were wide ranging, and represented "a historic opportunity to bring about important programmatic and management changes to ensure that the UN of tomorrow has the institutional foundation to succeed in the tasks asked of it by the member states".

In another report, which he tabled at the 60th session of the general assembly in March last year, recognising its greatly expanded role since its birth more than 60 years ago, the secretary-general proposed a "radical overhaul of the UN secretariat — its rules, structures, systems and culture. Up to now, this has not happened. The staff members of the organisation — its most valuable resource — are increasingly stretched".

What stands out clearly is that, even allowing for the fact that the UN is highly diverse and complex, more should have been achieved. Successive secretaries-general, including Annan, have failed miserably to deliver so that the UN secretariat today, in the words of an observer, "is a colony of incompetent leadership, misfits whose only concerns are their survival in what even UN insiders recognise as a corrupt environment".

Claudia Rosett, a New York-based investigative journalist and a thorn in the flesh of the leadership of the UN was concerned, commented in April last year that "on top of the broad reforms of the early 1990s, the sweeping reforms of 1997, the further reforms of 2002, and the world summit for reform in 2005, still more plans for reform are in the works".

"The UN has recently added an Office of Ethics (headed by a Malaysian special adviser to the secretary-general) — now expected to introduce in May what will presumably become an annual event: UN Ethics Day."

She added: "Is any of this likely to help? How do you manage change in an organisation that has for 60 years operated outside the norm, and generally regarding the world at large with a certain amount of disdain?"

"The only difference", one Malaysian wag, an old UN hand, said to me, "between the Vatican and the 38th floor is you do not actually see Annan and his top boys and girls wearing the purple robes, but make no mistake, they believe they are sanctified and protected by a merciful culture of impunity."

It is the system that has produced this sad state of affairs, and where reform should properly begin.

To his enormous credit, Annan was honest enough to admit his failure when he said that previous reform efforts, including those under his stewardship, while "generating some significant improvements, have sometimes addressed the symptoms rather than the causes of the organisation's weaknesses, and have failed to address new needs and requirements".

My conclusion: The "sleeping sickness" of the secretariat is wholly attributable to the highly political nature of its recruitment and appointment procedures, particularly at the senior level. That's why you end up with people inadequately trained and inexperienced by international standards, left in charge of, for example, such important functions as human resource management, which is the starting point of any reform initiative.

This is a position which requires its incumbent to have not only superb technical knowledge of the job acquired from outside the UN's archaic system, but much more important, a clear vision for the future.

This is why, at present, the UN seems to spend much of its waking hours floundering, directionless, and unsure where to begin its reform process. As far as effective management is concerned, it finds itself out of its depth, and no amount of further reform proposals will come to anything until human resource management is reinvented. How, for example, do you motivate a person by putting her on a month-to-month contract for 18 years?

In the midst of this bureaucratic nightmare, in slithers "the slippery eel" himself, a name by which Ban Ki Moon is affectionately known in his country among the Press corps. The South Korean has become Annan's successor by default, on the US ticket. There is no disguising that he is America's choice, just as Annan was before him.

Annan somehow showed he was his own man, and upset the US greatly and paid a heavy price for his independence. Ban does not come from the same mould, and is seen as being pliable.

Some of the best people who could help him make sense of the UN system, to name just two, Mark Malloch Brown, deputy secretary-general and Chris Burnham, under secretary-general in charge of the Department of Management under Annan, have gone.

Replacing them are the former foreign minister of Tanzania as deputy secretary-general, a lady whose experience falls far short of the requirements of the job, and Mexican UN staffer, Alicia Bercena, who now heads the demanding and complex department of management.

Any hopes of reform being aggressively prosecuted by these two lightweights are gone forever. Ban has lost a great opportunity to hit the ground running.

Last October, Thorsten Benner, author of the forthcoming *Crisis and Change: The UN Secretariat and the Quest for Accountability* had this to say in the *International Herald Tribune*: "It must have dawned on Ban Ki Moon that he is in fact getting three jobs: The world's top diplomat, CEO of the world's most important and most troubled international bureaucracy, and secular pope entrusted to preach and protect the values of the UN Charter."

Benner goes on to intone: "While advancing the UN's work on peace and security, human rights and sustainable development, Ban should never lose sight of his daily responsibility to revitalise the ailing UN secretariat."

I greatly fear that Ban has lost sight of his daily responsibility to revitalise the UN secretariat by putting square pegs in round holes.

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Source:

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