

**Lecture by Professor Ibrahim Gambari at the Elliott School of  
International Affairs, George Washington University, 10 April 2007**

**The United States and the United Nations -  
Working together in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**I. Introduction – The centrality of the US-UN relationship**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to be here at the Elliot School, one of the world's great centres of learning in international affairs. I have been given a quite formidable task: to deliver the second of a series of annual lectures on "The United States and the United Nations: Working together in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", following last year's lecture by former Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Seven years into the new century, this subject is more important than ever before. In an increasingly interdependent world and with growing demands on the United Nations - from conflict prevention to elections, peacekeeping to peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance to sustainable development and human rights -, an effective and strong relationship between the United States and the United Nations matters to hundreds of millions of people around the world. Indeed, for many, it makes the difference between life and death.

The case for a strong US-UN partnership is evident: Today's global challenges require global solutions. As a country with global reach and power and the world's biggest economy, how the United States uses its power has far-reaching consequences across the world. Similarly, as the only truly global Organization, the United Nations plays a crucial role as an agenda setter, as a forum, and an operational actor throughout the world.

The strength and vitality of the US-UN relationship is not only critical to achieving America's foreign policy objectives, but also to the success of the work of the United Nations. The United Nations can not effectively deliver its core mandates without a strong US engagement and support. Similarly America's foreign policy goals are more easily attained under the collective legitimisation and optimisation that the UN can provide in this regard. In any case, as the limits of unilateral exercise of power become more evident, the attraction of multilateralism through effective international institutions should grow.

More specifically, collective action through the United Nations offers three clear benefits for the United States: burden-sharing, greater effectiveness and wider legitimacy. This underlines the conclusion of the Gingrich-Mitchell Task Force on UN reform that a strong and effective US-UN relationship is in America's interest.

The rationale for the US-UN engagement is reflected in President Roosevelt's Four Freedoms – freedom from want and from fear, freedom of expression and of worship, which are similar to those freedoms enshrined in the UN charter. Indeed, a broad agenda of values and interests shared by the United States and the United Nations has developed: promotion of human rights and human dignity as well as democracy and good governance; peaceful settlement of disputes; international cooperation; and economic and social development. Since 1945, the UN has made much progress in advancing these values and interests globally although much work remains to be done in translating them into a reality for all. Indeed, there is room for commendation but also scope for improvement. The UN is as strong as its Member States make it, particularly the United States.

## **II. Addressing the Main Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

In charting the course ahead, recent as well as more distant history offers three main lessons that should guide the US-UN relationship in the 21st century: security is a collective responsibility and requires collective action; globalization demands global solidarity; there cannot be peace, security, and development without respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

*1) Collective responsibility and collective action:* The essence of the first lesson is that States need to cooperate with each other in order to ensure their own security. While this had already become apparent at the end of World War II, this lesson should have particularly strong resonance in today's world; a world in which armed conflict between or within States has political, military, economic, humanitarian and environmental consequences far beyond the conflict zones; a world where deadly weapons, including WMDs, can be obtained not only by rogue States but also non-state actors and by extremist groups; a world where failed States can become havens for terrorists; a world where HIV/AIDS, SARS, or avian flu, can be carried across oceans, let alone national borders, in a matter of hours; a world where terrorism has no face or borders and harms without distinction and regardless to your beliefs or background, and last but not least a world where the effects of climate change affects the lives of people everywhere. Against such threats as these, States share a responsibility for each other's security, and only by working together to make each other secure can we hope to achieve lasting security for ourselves.

A case in point is the Middle East, which is one of Secretary-General Ban-Ki moon's top priorities. The Secretary-General recently visited the region and saw for himself how important it is for the UN to work closely with the Parties and its Quartet partners, including the United States, to advance the cause of peace. The Secretary-General has welcomed Secretary Rice's commitment to deepen US engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. On Lebanon, the United Nations is committed to supporting its physical reconstruction, as well as its quest to be a peaceful, democratic and fully independent nation. Through its presence in the region and its impartial character, the UN can play an important role in finding sustainable peaceful solutions to these longstanding issues.

This also applies to Iraq. I have just returned from Iraq, in fact, where I had the chance to meet President Talabani and Prime Minister Maliki as well as other members of the Government. In Iraq, the UN – despite what some may think – is present and accounted for. Led by the Secretary-General's Special Representative, Mr. Ashraf Qazi, the United Nations Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) is supporting the Government of Iraq in the conduct of elections, the review of the constitution, human rights and humanitarian affairs. Mr. Qazi meets regularly with Iraqi leadership from all segments of society to promote national dialogue and reconciliation. He has also initiated a series of regional visits to rally support for the Government's efforts. While we are all aware of the difficulties involved, the international community has a shared responsibility to assist the Iraqi people. Daily attacks on innocent civilians have led to large-scale deaths and injuries as well as immense suffering, which the UN documents through quarterly human rights reports from the UN mission on the ground, UNAMI.

The United Nations has also stepped up its humanitarian efforts. And within the framework of the International Compact, we are working with the Government of Iraq, the US, regional and other countries, as well as financial institutions to support Iraq's long-term economic development, while also stressing the need for progress in the political and security fields. As the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on the International Compact with Iraq and Other Political Issues, I am working to ensure that the international community is fully engaged in this process. In these and other conflicts throughout the world, the UN's value-added must be leveraged to support the peaceful resolution of conflicts. One of our comparative advantages in places such as Lebanon and Iraq is our ability to communicate with and contact a very wide range of actors.

On terrorism, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon recalled, in a recent comment, the historic step forward taken by the General Assembly by adopting the United Nations Global Counterterrorism Strategy, “Never before,” he said, “have 192 countries agreed on an analysis of the threat of terrorism [and] never before have they come together to formulate a comprehensive collective response. They also resolved to take concrete actions to combat terrorism in a coordinated manner at national, regional, and international levels.”

The collective responsibility for security also includes a special responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity – a responsibility solemnly accepted by all nations at the 2005 UN World Summit. Obviously, this high-sounding doctrine will remain rhetoric unless and until those with the power to intervene effectively are prepared to take action – by exerting political, economic or, in the last resort, military muscle. This is why Secretary-General Ban has made Darfur one of his top priorities.

All in all, maintaining peace and security requires collective action. This can only be achieved by working together through a multilateral system, and by making the best possible use of the United Nations. The situation in the Middle East and Darfur may seem daunting, but in addressing these challenges, it is important to remember past successes of collective action through the United Nations that may initially have seemed every bit as intractable.

The enormous contribution of the United Nations to peace in Central America, for example, has endured for well over a decade. Cambodia, Namibia, Mozambique as well as South Africa present other positive examples. Quite recently, while it is far too early to declare success, the situation in Nepal is certainly moving in the right direction, as is that of Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and Sierra Leone. The United Nations played a very substantial role in stopping the war in Lebanon last summer. In all these cases, a key to success has been collective action through the United Nations based on a broad international consensus for action. By persevering despite all the odds, these collective efforts have the potential to create a more secure life for millions of people across the world.

**2) Need for global solidarity:** The second lesson is that States are in some measure responsible for each other's welfare. Without a measure of solidarity no society can be truly stable, and no one's prosperity is truly secure. It is not realistic to think that some can derive great benefits from globalization while others are left permanently marginalized. As the second United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld put it, "no one can expect to keep his garden tidy by reserving a spot for weeds."

To be sure, progress has been made. From 1990-2002, the developing world's proportion of people living in extreme poverty dropped from 28% to 19%, driven mostly by gains in eastern and southern Asia. Moreover, child mortality rates have dropped, access to sanitation has improved, and education standards have risen. But progress has been uneven and the overall levels of human deprivation remain staggering. Let me give you three examples: Each year, more than 10 million children die before their fifth birthday, mostly from preventable causes. Women in the developing world are over 45 times more likely, on average, to die during pregnancy and childbirth than women in the developed world. And more than 800 million people remain chronically undernourished.

That is why the UN Millennium Summit adopted a set of goals – the "**Millennium Development Goals**" (MDGs) – to be reached by 2015: goals such as reducing the proportion of people in the world who live on less than one dollar a day and who do not have clean water to drink by 50%; making sure all girls and boys receive at least primary education; slashing infant and maternal mortality; and stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Much of that can only be done by governments and people in the poor countries themselves including through good governance, tackling corruption and ending conflicts and wars. But key donors, such as the United States working together with the European Union and the United Nations have a vital role to play through debt relief and increased foreign assistance, fair terms of trade, and a non-discriminatory financial system.

**3) Respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law:** The third lesson is that peace, security and development ultimately depend on respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. If our different communities are to live together in peace, we must stress what unites us: our common humanity, and our shared belief that human dignity and rights should be protected by law through a democratic system. That is vital for development, too. Both foreign investors and a country's own citizens are more likely to engage in productive activity when their basic rights are protected and they can be

confident of fair treatment under the law. And policies that genuinely favour economic development are much more likely to be adopted if the people most in need of development can make their voice heard.

In short, human rights, democracy and the rule of law are vital to global security and prosperity. On that point, I know I am preaching to the converted. The United States has historically been at the forefront of the global human rights movement, as will always be epitomized by the leadership role of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Over the past three years, a well-intentioned effort has been underway to reform the UN human rights mechanisms, in particular through the creation of the new Human Rights Council to replace the previously discredited Human Rights Commission. Both the Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for Human Rights echoed the criticism that the Council's initial actions were lacking balance, But the Council's recent statement of concern about human rights in Darfur was a step toward broadening the focus beyond just one country, and that trend must be encouraged. The Secretary-General, while fully respecting US decisions in this regard, continues to believe that direct US participation could make a difference in ensuring that the Council works in an effective and balanced way.

For the United Nations, promoting democracy and the rule of law is one of its core activities. Through its vast network of agencies, such as UNDP, the United Nations is helping States to build capacity for institutionalizing democracy, good governance and the rule of law in all parts of the world. One important element of this is **electoral assistance**. From 1989 to 2005 the United Nations has provided such **assistance** to 96 countries. Having midwived the birth of East Timor, the United Nations is currently assisting the conduct of the first post-independence elections there. And through the new **UN Democracy Fund** established in July 2005 with a strong push from the US, the United Nations is supporting democratization through projects that build and strengthen democratic institutions, promote human rights, and ensure the participation of all groups in democratic processes.

### **III. UN Reform**

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Effective collective action requires that multilateral institutions are organized in a fair, democratic and efficient way. This is why UN reform has remained an ongoing priority almost since the establishment of the Organization, and never more so than today.

A lot has been written and said about streamlining the working methods of the General Assembly and about making the Security Council more representative – issues that have lost none of their relevance. But as a Secretariat Official, I would like to concentrate here on a few examples of processes under way that are aimed at improving the capacity of the Secretariat in the vital area of peace and security, as well as changing the working culture of the Organization.

To respond to the growing demands in the area of peace and security the United Nations is engaged in about 30 peace operations around the world, including 18 peacekeeping operations with more than 100,000 personnel – the largest number since the creation of the UN more than 60 years ago. Through the establishment of a new Department of Field Support and other measures, the United Nations is seeking to strengthen the capacity of the Organization to manage and sustain peace operations. Let me emphasize in this regard that UN peacekeeping has proven to be a cost-effective instrument. According to a recent study by the US Government Accountability Office, for instance, deploying UN peacekeepers to Haiti has resulted in a cost to the US that is one eighth what it would be if the US were forced to deploy unilaterally.

But I would like to also point out that UN preventive action and peacemaking through good offices and mediation can be even more cost-effective than peacekeeping. Ultimately, conflicts are only resolved through political solutions that meet the needs and interests of the parties and communities concerned.

In the 1990s a large number of conflicts were brought to an end, either through direct U.N. mediation or by the efforts of other third parties acting with United Nations support. The list includes El Salvador, Guatemala, Namibia, Cambodia, Mozambique, Tajikistan, Bougainville, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Burundi and the North-South conflict in Sudan. Based on the 2005 World Summit recommendation to strengthen the Secretary-General's good offices and mediation role, efforts are under way to strengthen United Nations capacity to better support the Secretary-General's role and that of his Special Representatives in this area, as well as the roles of Regional Organizations as partners in conflict prevention and peacemaking.

Finally, the Secretary-General has made it a priority to create a staff of international civil servants that lives up to the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity as called for in the Charter. Recent reforms that help achieve such standards include the creation of a UN Ethics Office, a new more stringent financial disclosure form for UN employees, and enhanced protection for whistleblowers that wish to speak out against instances of waste or abuse. To this end, Secretary-General Ban has led by example, making his own financial disclosure form publicly available on the UN website. To make UN staff more capable of responding to the demands of Member States, the Secretary-General intends to place a greater emphasis on career development, training and accountability.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

With the arguments above, I have attempted to demonstrate that for the United States, the United Nations is an essential multilateral partner to find political solutions to conflicts around the world. The world body is also crucial as an instrument to share the burden of peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and sustainable development with other partners.

Yet, for the United Nations the leadership of the United States is equally indispensable if it is to make a difference on the key challenges facing the international

community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And with demands on the United Nations exploding on virtually every front, a sound financial base is a *sine qua non*. As the largest contributor, the United States has an important role to play to ensure that United Nations activities are funded in a way that enables our Organization to fulfill its various mandates effectively.

The United States has been key to the creation of the United Nations, crucial throughout the history of the organization and will remain indispensable to our future. It is no secret that the US-UN relationship has been strained in recent times. At the same time, I would argue that even against the backdrop of these very visible differences, there has been an extensive, uninterrupted and fruitful degree of US-UN cooperation all along the way. This part of the story has gone largely unreported.

Will new differences arise? Inevitably, they will, given that the United Nations must reflect the views of all of its Member States and not only those of its most powerful members, otherwise, it would cease to be the UN. But I personally sense a new wind in the air, and I firmly believe that the opportunity exists today to strengthen and build on this essential relationship, particularly with a new Secretary-General at the helm of the Organization. Success will require both a continued UN commitment to reform and a continued US commitment to engagement with the Organization aimed at making the UN work as effectively as possible in the pursuit of the noble objectives of its Charter, bearing in mind what an African character said to a Frenchman in the novel *Ambiguous Adventure* by a Senegalese author Amadou Kane, “we have not had the same past, you and ourselves, but we shall have strictly the same future; the era of separate destinies has run its course” .

Thank you for listening.