

A 21st Century United Nations

By Zeid bin Ra'ad

A conflict erupts in an explosive part of the world and the United Nations is asked to serve as the only mediating force acceptable to all sides. A natural disaster engulfs an entire region, and the United Nations is asked to coordinate an unprecedented relief operation. Does this mean the United Nations is important? Yes. Does it mean that it is equipped to succeed? No - not now, not yet, not without a genuine renewal to make it a 21st century agent for change and progress. The UN's recent centrality to resolving conflicts and alleviating suffering around the world should serve – not as cause for complacency – but as a spur to deeper change as it looks to new leadership at the end of this year.

A 21st century United Nations worthy of the hopes and aspirations of a new, post - Cold War generation of citizens in every part of the world must be guided by five central principles -

Reflect the initiative and innovation of a new generation of leaders driving progress throughout the world in development, peace and human rights. From Shanghai to Santiago, from Johannesburg to London, we are witnessing the rise of a new generation of builders -- men and women of every race and creed creating growth and development by harnessing the potential of globalization for the benefit of their societies. To succeed in the 21st century, the United Nations must partner with these forces of progress and modernity.

Serve as a bridge between cultures and faiths in search of peace and development. The ongoing deadly conflicts in the Middle East, and the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 and those that have followed them -- from Bali to Madrid and London to Amman -- have made plain the urgent need to prevent extremism from succeeding in creating further victims and divisions between peoples. A United Nations that understands the sources of these schisms, where they occur, and can speak to all sides with experience and credibility, can play an important role in resolving these dangerous conflicts.

Engage today's threats as a peacekeeper and mediator with vision and credibility. The recent outbreak of war in Lebanon and the ongoing conflicts in Africa have reminded the world of the UN's unique legitimacy in restoring peace and security. Global legitimacy, on its own, however, is not enough. The UN must also be effective and principled in the face of war. Only by applying the lessons of the peacekeeping failures of the 1990s – Bosnia and Rwanda in particular – can it lay claim to being the peacekeeper of the 21st century.

Advocate the cause of international justice. Wherever peace is threatened and development is imperilled, the rule of law is the beginning of the answer. The United Nations has played a central role in promoting the rule of law – both at the national and international level – but can and must do more to put the rule of law at the service of the world’s peoples.

Renew itself at the speed of globalization. To deliver on its founding promise, the United Nations must be willing to challenge its own practices and structures as never before – its governance, its management, its practices in the field, its willingness to hold itself and everyone who serves under its flag accountable to the highest standards of integrity and excellence. The 21st century has already brought immeasurable progress to those societies able to seize on the opportunities of globalization – the United Nations must learn from them, and become an agent as well as a beneficiary of that progress.

To succeed today, the United Nations cannot merely serve as a tool for the large and powerful countries of the world to dominate the global agenda. Nor must it be used simply as an instrument of smaller countries to delay or deter necessary change. Renewed by all and for all in the 21st century, the United Nations can fulfill its founding promise.

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