
Looking down on the United Nations

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By Kath Noble
The United Nations is a lot more worthwhile than it sometimes appears. From afar, as we read about its seemingly endless debates, there is a tendency to conclude that the money could be put to more effective use. International bureaucrats simply do not look up to the job of saving the world. Recruit more doctors and teachers, or spend the funds on developing alternative energy resources, preventing nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists and finding a cure for HIV/AIDS, we are tempted to proclaim. Hurry up and do something. Although the United Nations is supposed to be working towards such objectives as well, there is no getting away from the impression that its main purpose is to boost employment in the hospitality sector, all those restaurants and clubs that keep visiting diplomats entertained.

I must say that as I headed to Geneva to attend the World Conference Against Racism, I had exactly that feeling. I do not like speeches, and the idea of listening to hundreds of people commenting in allocated turn on a rather noncommittal statement that had been agreed in a series of lengthy meetings over the course of the previous year seemed to me quite befuddlingly dull. Just forward the conclusions in writing, I thought to myself, so that I can read through in the comfort of my own home, preferably with a cup of tea. Process often turns out to be more important than outcome, especially at the United Nations, where the purpose is to bring the world of divergent perspectives to a consensus. And a number of interesting points were made very clear during the five day event. First, less has changed in the United States than some of us would like to believe. I was not the only person to celebrate the election of Barack Obama, largely in anticipation of a more engaged foreign policy. How the only superpower interacts with the United Nations is key, demonstrating its respect for other countries, and George Bush obviously was not interested. He did what he pleased, and the United Nations was relevant only to the extent that it justified his military aggression in Iraq and elsewhere. Foreigners liked Barack Obama, and I think a fair number of us believed that he would return the favour when he came to power. Barack Obama should have supported the World Conference Against Racism. As the first black President of the United States, he was expected to deliver a powerful message. It was also the perfect opportunity to reaffirm his commitment to multilateralism, to admit that whatever our differences, diplomacy had to be given a chance, especially on matters of such importance. The United Nations deserved it after putting up with George Bush for all those years. Instead, Barack Obama decided on a boycott. His Yes We Can refrain was cast aside, leaving behind a decidedly No I Won't impression. It would be easy to imagine that there was something terribly controversial being planned in Geneva. The United States said that the meeting would be used to single out Israel for attack, which sounded disturbingly like George Bush. However, the rather noncommittal statement that was issued did not mention the situation there even once, because the countries who had wanted to include references to Palestinian suffering withdrew their requests. Islamic states agreed to cut bits about the defamation of religion too, when it became clear that Europe was not happy. Pressure from Israel somehow convinced Barack Obama that these concessions were not enough to require his involvement. Secondly, Western opposition to Iran is as unprincipled as many of us have always suspected. Again, the European states who walked out of the speech by Mahmoud Ahmedinejad claimed that they did so because of his unacceptable denigration of Israel. Of course, it would not have mattered if he had spoken of little more provocative than the weather. They had planned the move carefully, and leapt out of their seats at the first mention of Israel, which Mahmoud Ahmedinejad called a racist state. Whatever rules the United Nations has about references to its members, which were seen in action when the NGOs got to speak, their criticism prompting an impressive number of objections from the Iranian and Chinese delegations as their countries were flayed by Jewish and Tibetan groups respectively, this seemed to me a reasonable opinion to put forward. Let others disagree when their allocated turn came, I felt. It clearly was not the equivalent of Hitler explaining why Aryans were superior and how they were going to gas six million Jews, as some commentators have suggested. Israel, the Iranian President said, was created to assuage guilt for European racism, and this imposed unbelievable suffering on another people. That it is still doing so only makes things worse. These are matters of fact, not interpretation, and there would seem to be every reason to mention them. Other speakers referenced the horrors of the slave trade and colonialism, apartheid South Africa and other moral blunders of the past, so the meddling by various powers in the Middle East cannot be exempt from review. Whether Mahmoud Ahmedinejad was correct to describe the assault on the Gaza Strip earlier this year as genocide, Israel surely deserves criticism for its approach to the Palestinian issue, which has dragged on for an impossible length of time. Mahmoud Ahmedinejad raised other important matters too, issues that have nothing to do with Israel. As well as criticising the Western alliance for its invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, which he rightly pointed out brought misery on the people of those countries, something he implied would never have been considered if they were white, he attacked the biased composition of the Security Council, with the five states who happened to be most powerful at the time of its creation still holding sway over the rest of the world. It was unreasonable, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad said, to discuss racism at the United Nations without referring to the discriminatory nature of the organisation itself. Such questions deserved attention, but they got very little. A sea of white faces had scurried out of the hall by then, perfectly determined not to hear whatever came out of the Iranian President's mouth, and it was their walkout that was most discussed in the aftermath. It seemed to me that Europe had brought additional delegates to the session with Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, just to boost the crowd dashing for the exit. It was rather childish behaviour. Thirdly, what most of us read about the United Nations is shockingly one dimensional. Mahmoud Ahmedinejad was the focus of almost everything said about the World Conference Against Racism. His speech and the walkout by the European states were admittedly some of the more exciting moments of the week, but plenty of other things happened too. A good part of the reason for this was evident in the media centre, which was swarming with journalists from the United States and Israel. Their governments may not have been participating, but they were present in force to tell the story. Most of the others were from the European press, perhaps explaining why a

balanced picture failed to emerge. Similar imbalances were rather obvious in the NGO gallery too. Watching the Iranian President's speech gave a very odd impression of the opinion of global civil society. It appeared as though the vast majority of NGOs were violently opposed to Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, with just a handful of almost equally vociferous supporters. Jeers and cheers echoed round the hall, as what seemed like an endless stream of people came forward to hold aloft placards and banners. But the fact is that a handful of NGOs had brought dozens of people, solely for the purpose of shouting at Mahmoud Ahmedinejad. One Jewish student group had registered almost 200 people for the conference, of which at least 30 turned up. Given that there were only 1,000 NGO representatives in total, it was a major delegation. The United Nations staff did not help matters. Security was almost totally absent, and I managed to walk into the hall some few metres away from the podium at which Mahmoud Ahmedinejad was speaking, my unchecked bag in hand. I was supposed to be in the Press gallery, but nobody seemed bothered that day, although they would be later. Officials did not exactly rush to start removing protestors from the NGO gallery either. Palestinian NGOs complained that their requests for side events had been turned down, on the basis that the subjects they wanted to discuss were insufficiently broad, focusing as they did on the situation in their own country. It is not clear why this should be a problem, but I thought it particularly ridiculous when I wandered into a meeting that was supposed to be about preventing genocide, which turned out to be a group of American and other Western Muslims and Israeli Arabs launching verbal assaults on Iran and Saudi Arabia. There is nothing wrong with that either, but it is rather curious that their discussion was not refused permission. Faults are sure to abound in any organisation of the size of the United Nations, but the fact remains that conferences like these perform a useful function in raising issues of concern to us all. Bringing countries together is always going to be difficult, especially on a highly political subject like racism. It should be expected. The important thing is to ensure that all states are involved in the process, listen to what is said on the platform, discuss its merits, and then move on a common agenda. It is the powerful who want to sideline the United Nations, because they can get what they want in other ways. The rest of us must support its efforts. Kath Noble is a freelance journalist based in Colombo. She may be contacted by email at kathnoble99@gmail.com. Courtesy: Island.lk