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OPINION

The UN's 78th Birthday: Revisiting the Operational Credibility of the United Nations

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Credit: United Nations

NEW YORK, Oct 30 2023 (IPS) - I thank the United Nations Asia Network for Diversity and Inclusion (UN-ANDI) for inviting me to present the keynote speech on this special occasion for the observance of the United Nations Day.

I commend wholeheartedly the UN-ANDI and its dedicated team for their work, particularly its recent survey report on racism and racial discrimination despite the constraints of the global Covid pandemic of last few years. I am proud to be associated with the conceptualization of UN-ANDI in late 2019.

As the first ever effort to bring together the diverse group of personnel from Asia and the Pacific in the UN system, UN-ANDI needs all our support and encouragement.

In my decades of work for the United Nations, both representing my country as well as representing the organization, I have seen many faces of the world body – positive and not so positive, spirit-uplifting and also frustrating, focused and determined and also confused and politicized.

But the most enduring experience for me about the work of the United Nations in its 78 years of existence has been its contribution to making a positive difference in the lives of the millions of people of our planet.

Over the years, the United Nations has been tested time and again by conflicts, humanitarian crises and poverty and deprivation, but has always risen to live up to the challenges in a determined and inclusive way. It has been rightly called the “indispensable common house of the entire human family.” Respected global peace leader and philosopher Daisaku Ikeda describes it as the “Parliament of the World.”

It is worth reminding us that without attracting attention, the United Nations and its family of agencies and entities are engaged in a continuing gigantic endeavour against enormous odds to improve every aspect of people’s lives around the world. It is also worth remembering that the UN’s inspirational norm-setting role covers a very broad range of areas.

In my personal association with the application of my country, Bangladesh for membership of the United Nations in 1972 and since then, in my fifty-one years of collaborative involvement with the UN, I can affirm with great pride that all major aspects of Bangladesh’s development architecture reflect the stamp of the UN.

Last Tuesday, as we observed the UN Day, I received many “Happy UN Day” text messages. I did not have the intellectual and moral energy to join them. So, reflecting the current realities, I responded by saying “A not-so-happy UN Day in a conflict-ridden world where the UN is found to be helpless.” That helplessness pains me immensely.

The progressive British newspaper Guardian in its editorial on 26 October echoed that perception by saying that “The United Nations marked its 78th birthday on Tuesday but had little cause for celebration.” It went on to say that “On the same day, Israel called for António Guterres to resign over his [remarks](#) on the Israel-Hamas war, and accused him of ‘blood libel’.”

The well-meaning peoples of the world should not be cocooned in our own isolation without recognizing and understanding the reality where we are at this of time. In the most unbecoming manner and forsaking all diplomatic decency, the Israeli Permanent Representative to the UN turned on the Secretary-General at the open session of the Security Council is inconceivable and totally unacceptable.

The earlier Guardian editorial appropriately wrote that “But 10 years ago, it would have been hard to imagine the contempt radiating from the Israeli Ambassador’s announcement that UN representatives would be refused visas because ‘the time has come to teach them a lesson’. That surely reflects the UN’s reduced status.”

The conservative Wall Street Journal went even further the day before on 25 October in its editorial board’s opinion to say that “This is how the UN makes itself a fellow traveler in the advancing march of global disorder.”

We need to revisit the operational credibility of our much-cherished world body. What was needed in 1945 to be enshrined in the UN Charter is to be judged in the light of current realities. If the Charter needs to be amended to live up to the challenges of global complexities and paralyzing intergovernmental politicization, let us do that. It is high time to focus on that direction. Blindly treating the words of the Charter as sacrosanct may be self-defeating and irresponsible. The UN could be buried under its own rubble unless we set our house in order now.

I am often asked, during ‘questions and answers’ segment following my public speaking, if I want to recommend one thing that would make the UN perform better, what would it be. My clear and emphatic answer always has been “Abolish the Veto!”

Veto is undemocratic, irrational and against the true spirit of the principle of sovereign equality of the United Nations.

In an opinion piece in the IPS Journal in March 2022, I wrote that “Believe me, the veto power influences not only the decisions of the Security Council but also all work of the UN, including importantly the choice of the Secretary-General.”

The same opinion piece asserted that “I believe the abolition of veto requires a greater priority attention in the reforms process than the enlargement of the Security Council membership with additional permanent ones. Such permanency is simply undemocratic. I also believe that the veto power is not ‘the cornerstone of the United Nations’ but in reality, its tombstone.”

Abolishing the veto would also release the election of the Secretary-General from the manipulating control of the veto-wielding permanent members of the Security Council. I would also recommend that in future the Secretary-General would have only one term of seven years, as opposed to current practice of automatically renewing the Secretary-General’s tenure for a second five-year term, without even evaluating his performance.

After choosing nine men successively to be the world’s topmost diplomat, I strongly believe that it is incumbent on the United Nations to have the sanity and sagacity of electing a woman as the next Secretary-General.

Also, I am of the opinion that a formalized and mandated involvement of and genuine consultation with the civil society would enhance the UN’s credibility. The UN leadership

and Member States should work diligently on that without fail for a decision by the on-going session of the General Assembly.

Transparency and accountability are essential in the budget processes of the UN and personnel recruitments at all levels. Two other areas which need more scrutiny are extra-budgetary resources received from Member States and consultancy practices including budgetary allocations for that by the organization. Special attention in these areas is needed to restore the UN's credibility and thereby effectiveness and efficiency for the benefit of the humanity as a whole.

The international community has reached a fork in the road. One path is to resign ourselves to the idea that an effective multilateral system is beyond our grasp, with the potential for reversion to the dangerous, anarchic world order that the United Nations was set up to improve upon.

The other path, also rocky but considerably more hopeful, leads to global solidarity based on shared principles, objectives, and commitments, on oneness of humanity and on a global security architecture that has a chance of commanding the genuine respect as well as the true acceptance and adherence of all States.

Let me conclude by asserting that, all said, I continue to hold on to my deep faith in multilateralism and , my belief and trust in the United Nations as the most universal organization for the people and the planet is renewed and reaffirmed!

*This opinion piece is the enhanced version of the keynote address by **Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury**, former Under-Secretary-General and High Representative of the United Nations at the virtual observance of the United Nations Day (24 October) by the United Nations Asia Network for Diversity and Inclusion (UN-ANDI) on 27 October 2023.*

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