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Ban, UN Face Difficult Tasks Ahead

By Zack Gross

Ban Ki-moon of the Republic of Korea was sworn in as the eighth Secretary-General of the United Nations on December 15th and took office officially just over a month ago, on January 1st. Mr. Ban replaces Kofi Annan, a Nigerian, who held the post for two five-year terms and became well known as an activist, as opposed to a manager. Ban might be seen as more of the managerial type and has emphasized UN bureaucratic reform as a main plank in his platform.

Ban is a well-educated man, with a Masters Degree from Harvard University. He speaks three languages (Korean, English and French) and has a long history of involvement in Korean and international issues and politics. He has held the position of his country's Foreign Affairs & Trade Minister, and represented Korea at the UN where he was at the forefront of "denuclearization" talks on the Korean Peninsula.

The new Secretary-General, in a speech at the UN Environmental Program Governing Council this past week in Nairobi, proclaimed that "action on climate change will be one of my priorities." He acknowledged that industrialized countries are causing the greatest harm to the planet's ecosystem by degrading the environment and depleted natural resources in an unsustainable manner, while poorer regions of the world – especially Africa and small island states – will suffer most from the resulting climate change.

In his statement to UNEP, Ban recommended that the UN forge relationships with business and civil society to tackle environmental problems. He also called for UN member states to better understand the relationship between economic development and environmental degradation, and that with sustainable development, countries can grow their economies while safeguarding the planet's legacy for future generations. Canada, once in the forefront of taking action on global environmental issues, has been criticized recently for backing out of the Kyoto Accord, while its public have named the environment as their top concern.

An area where Kofi Annan put a great deal of energy in his decade as UN Secretary-General was in African conflict zones. Ban faces a major first test with the on-going genocide in Darfur, Sudan.

Observers feel that the Sudanese government will use the changeover of UN leadership to delay allowing a peacekeeping force into its country, thus extending the genocide. It is hoped that Ban will convince China, both a supporter of his and of Sudan, to offer troops for the mission in Darfur, and that Chinese President Hu Jintao will meet directly with Sudanese President Bashir.

One of the first questions Ban was asked by the media, when he was sworn in as Secretary-General, was about the 2005 General Assembly adopting the “responsibility to protect” doctrine. This calls on the international community to protect civilians in countries where the government is unable or unwilling to do so. His response was that the doctrine needs to have more solid terms and framework, so the concept can be “operationalized.”

Member states will be judging Ban on his leadership, in part by how far he gets with this concept and the unbridled human rights abuses of some governments against their people.

As a counterpoint to the more activist and strategist Kofi Annan, some observers believe that Ban Ki-moon has been brought in, supported by the United States (whom Annan was often at odds with), to be a manager and work on UN reform and other internal issues. The UN is thought to be too expensive, too large and too conflict-laden internally to be effective.

The question remains if our world needs this type of leadership at this particular moment in its history. It is possible that the Deputy Secretaries General that are appointed will make a difference here (Ban has pledged to appoint a woman as his top deputy). However, activism suffered a blow when Canadian Stephen Lewis, who was so outspoken on issues of African poverty and HIV/AIDS, was allowed to leave when Kofi Annan did.

It is obviously too early to judge Ban Ki-moon, but the people who suffer day to day from human rights abuses, environmental degradation and on-going regional conflict will want fast action on their issues by the world community. Given the grave challenges our planet faces, too much effort expended on management policy will be tantamount to the proverbial re-arranging of deck chairs on the Titanic.

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