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Kofi Annan Marks His Final UN Day

By Zack Gross

October 24th, the day the United Nations Charter went into effect in 1945, is the day set aside to celebrate the UN each year. While UN Day is being marked this week, commemorating sixty-one years of humanitarian and peace building efforts, many will be wondering about the future of the organization as Kofi Annan leaves his position as Secretary-General at the end of the year and new leadership takes over. Also leaving with Annan is high profile Canadian AIDS Ambassador to Africa, Stephen Lewis.

The main motivation for establishing the UN at the end of World War II was “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war” but that job description has grown to include the promotion of education, health, peace, a clean environment and other worthy causes. At the same time, many different – even contradictory - controversies have plagued the UN throughout its life: that it is too expensive and too bureaucratic, that it has an anti-Western (or anti-US) bias, that it is used for endless debate but little action on important issues, that it is a tool of US foreign policy.

To mark UN Day 2006, national UN support organizations around the world are highlighting a variety of issues. As an example, the US UN Association is focusing on maternal health and well being. This fits as one of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals – eight objectives the UN and its member states have set for themselves to accomplish by 2015 to improve the lives of the world’s poor majority.

Kofi Annan will have completed two five-year terms as UN Secretary-General, having taken on the job on January 1st, 1997. However, he has been a United Nations employee since 1962, when he joined the World Health Organization as an administrative officer. Over the next 35 years, Annan held a variety of positions with the UN Economic Commission, UN Emergency Forces, High Commission on Refugees, and Peacekeeping Operations at the UN’s New York Headquarters.

As Secretary-General, Annan cut a thousand staff positions and chased down the US for payment of past dues in order to avoid UN bankruptcy. Annan has championed the fight against AIDS in Africa and has tried to mediate the many bloody internal and regional wars that have plagued the continent. For that, he and the United Nations received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001. Said the judges: “The only negotiable road to global peace and co-operation goes by way of the United Nations. Mr. Annan has been pre-eminent in bringing new life to the organization.”

At the same time, his efforts have not always yielded the necessary results, showing that his office and the United Nations don’t have the clout that the UN’s founders once dreamed they would have. Slaughters have continued and AIDS is still a

major scourge, and nations continue to foment war and withhold the funds necessary to address world problems.

Contradictorily, Annan has been accused of being a pawn of business and Western interests because of his idea of a strategic partnership with the private sector, while at the same time being unpopular with the Bush administration for being outspoken in his opposition to the Iraq Invasion. The US forced out Annan's predecessor, Boutros Boutros Ghali, after one term in office for his alleged anti-US sentiments. Annan's proposal of a "Global Compact" has brought corporations into a discussion of their responsibility to the environment and labour, but also caused critics to wonder if this gave business too great a say in world affairs and too easy a way to "greenwash" their activities.

Kofi Annan evaluates his own contribution to the UN process in his last UN Day Message, which was released earlier this month. He lists five areas of progress and five current major challenges. He applauds increased development aid and Third World debt relief. He points to a scaling up of the world's response to AIDS. He counts that fewer wars, both internal and external, are being fought. More governments, he says, are being elected and being made accountable to their citizens. He asserts that, at least in words, states acknowledge their responsibility to protect people from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

On the other side of the ledger, the gap between rich and poor continues to grow. Very few countries are on track to reach the eight Millennium Development Goals on time. There are still many active brutal conflicts and human rights abuses. The nuclear weapons non-proliferation regime is breaking down. Finally, terrorism and the reaction to it are spreading death, destruction, fear and suspicion.

Ultimately, one has to ask: "What would the world be like today without the forum the UN provides, and without the programs and services it offers?" While one can identify shortcomings, on balance the United Nations is an institution worth celebrating.

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