

UN – back on its feet?

by Peter S. Ross

After a dramatic decline in prestige and influence in the early 1980s, the future of the United Nations now looks brighter. Despite the near-crippling impact of the financial crisis and the bleak outlook for its resolution, things are getting done in the UN's deliberating bodies. Member nations, on the whole, have strengthened their resolve to contribute to this multilateral forum. A number of factors have contributed to this change.

The INF accord

An agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union banning short- and medium-range nuclear missiles was anticipated throughout the fall 1987 session of the General Assembly. Whenever the superpowers talk the mood at the UN brightens. For the first time in history both sides will be dismantling nuclear weapons. Although the agreement will only cover approximately 3 percent of the world's total nuclear arsenal, it is welcome news to the diplomats at the UN after many years of stalemate. It is, however, difficult to say whether the momentum generated by the arms accord will gather strength.

Major progress has been made at the Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva in the area of chemical and biological weapons. The possibility of a treaty banning these weapons would give a big boost to the CD. It has been meeting without any concrete results since its creation in 1978 by the United Nations Special Session on Disarmament (UNSSOD). It now appears as though a draft treaty could be ready by the fall of 1988. Some difficult obstacles remain to be overcome, but substantial progress in the sensitive area of verification has increased the possibility of an agreement being reached. If an agreement is reached at the independent CD, it would likely be sent to the UN for voting and signature (the UN has 159 member states, the CD only 40).

Designed by Costa Rica's president, Oscar Arias Sanchez, the Central American Peace Plan was met with enthusiasm around the world. The awarding of the Nobel Peace to President Arias attested to the serious optimism which surrounded his plan, and reflects the world community's desire to see peace come to an embattled area. Costa Rica's Ambassador to the United Nations, Carlos José Gutierrez, said "a lot of forces are working against the plan, but it is the best thing that has happened in Central America since the situation began deteriorating in 1979. It's the first real glimmer of hope....The UN has been frustrated for many years by the conflict and strife in Central America. It met the plan with great enthusiasm." As a result, the UN gained prominence and respect in Central America. "In the past," he went on, "people in Central America were divided between the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS). The Central American Peace Plan opened up good com-

munication links between the UN and the OAS, and that has strengthened Central America's regional identity at the UN. This has had a stabilizing effect in Central America."

Disarmament and development

The recent UN-sponsored and -organized international conference on Disarmament and Development culminated in the adoption of a consensus report by the 150 participating nations. Among its conclusions the report defined security in broad terms, noting the security of a nation depended on an array of political, economic, social, environmental and military factors. Agreement by all participants on this definition represents a conceptual breakthrough, and could pave the way for concrete disarmament measures that contribute to security and economic development. The absence of US participation was a major disappointment, but no one can ignore the successful outcome of the conference.

The World Commission on Environment and Development presented a bleak yet constructive and all-encompassing assessment of the planet's trends in environmental degradation and economic development. The Prime Minister of Norway, Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland, chaired the 23-person Commission (members included Jim MacNeill and Maurice Strong of Canada). The Commission was set up by the United Nations General Assembly in 1983, and its report Entitled *Our Common Future*, was released in the spring of 1987. In a rare occurrence, the Security Council agreed unanimously to a resolution demanding a ceasefire between Iran and Iraq, and asked the Secretary General to mediate. The agreement among the permanent members of Council – France, Britain, China, the Soviet Union and the United States – coupled with the acceptance by both Iran and Iraq of the UN Secretary General as a mediator – had fuelled speculation that the UN might be able to play a more active and constructive role in the conflict. However, the Secretary General's recent abandonment of his mediation efforts may signal a weakening of this role.

The new USSR

The Soviet Union announced in September 1987 that it would pay off US\$197 million in debts for peacekeeping which it had previously refused to support. This at-

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