

Watching the UN turn forty

by Firdaus James Kharas

A King, a prince, twenty-five Presidents and Heads of State, twenty-six Prime Ministers and Heads of Government, twenty-four foreign ministers and seventeen others converged on the United Nations for a two-week period between October 14 and 24, 1985, to mark the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. It was, as *The New York Times* said, "the largest gathering of world leaders in history."

By any measure, it was a remarkable event. The world's leaders came to make statements on their foreign policies and to revitalize the United Nations system. Their presence alone signified the importance the international community attaches to the world organization. The fortieth anniversary celebrations were a success from the moment the leaders indicated their desire to attend.

The debate itself achieved the desired results, although it nearly foundered. A group of developing countries, led by India, tabled a resolution inviting the head of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Yassir Arafat, and the head of the South-West African People's Organization, Sam Nujoma, to make statements. The resolution directly contradicted a decision of the Preparatory Committee that only states would be allowed to participate in the debate. The United States indicated President Reagan would not attend if the PLO and SWAPO were invited. After some frantic negotiations involving, among others, Canada's highly-respected Ambassador, Stephen Lewis, a face-saving statement was made by the President of the General Assembly and the resolution was never put to a vote. Nothing would have been worse for the image of the UN than to have its own fortieth anniversary celebrations become a shambles.

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Speeches, speeches, speeches

I listened to many hundred of thousands of words. It would be easy to dismiss each speech as useless pap. So often it was and this lent credence to the critics who say there is too much rhetoric at the United Nations. There were bold new initiatives, there was little progress toward immediate resolution of problems. But it would be a mistake to merely evaluate each speech independently in terms of political significance. Rather, it is necessary to feel the cumulative effect of all the statements. More than at any other time, they showed the collective will of the world. The leaders, each speaking from a unique perspective, accounted together for a reaffirmation of the intense desire for international understanding and cooperation.

When one looked out over the vistas of the General Assembly, one saw the leaders attempting, as human beings, to communicate with each other. A forum was provided for them to shake hands, speak, and perhaps to know each other a little better. It was, for two weeks, a meeting place for the world. The value of such a *tour-de-force* cannot be measured easily. As the Belgian Minister of State said, "We will never be able to gauge the incomparable value of rapprochement between statesmen, who, because of meeting here, came to know each other, often appreciate each other, and established at the United Nations a relationship of trust." One could look around the room and see dozens of leaders engaged in animated discussion throughout the area. In one corner, the Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom and Ireland were talking. In another the Vice-President of the United States could be seen talking to a minister from Algeria. And in our case the Prime Minister of India strolled over for a conversation with Brian Mulroney. Where else could it have happened? When else has it happened?

Concurrently, there were dozens of bilateral meetings away from the General Assembly. The importance of these discussions may never be fully known but already signs are appearing that the private discussions between leaders here at the UN inched the world forward.

Some highlights

Speaker after speaker expressed confidence in the United Nations and support for what it symbolizes. The Swedish Prime Minister of Sweden, Olaf Palme, in perhaps the best speech of all, began with these words: "Let me at the outset from this rostrum convey this message . . . we believe in this Organization and we are committed to it." His them