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Following two world wars and the failure of the League of Nations, various countries met in San Francisco in 1945 to seek a structure to ensure world peace. Since its inception, the United Nations has gained diplomatic ground internationally in such areas as keeping the peace, facilitating democracy and strengthening human rights. These achievements, however, are tempered by crucial shortcomings. Financial dependence on wealthy member states, the paralysis of the Security Council by powerful nations, and the limiting principal of a states' sovereignty are typical of the problems the United Nations must overcome to be impartial and effective.

Peace and democracy

Peacekeeping has become the UN's diplomatic cornerstone. One of the most prominent UN peacekeeping forces was created in 1964 to put an end to intercommunal violence that had erupted in Cyprus.

Following the subsequent military intervention of Turkish forces in 1974, violence was again halted through UN-sanctioned negotiations. A 180 km buffer zone was created to keep Turkish forces and the Cyprus National Guard apart. Since 1974, UN peacekeeping forces have ensured violence would not flare up again, allowing citizens of Cyprus to go about their lives without the fear of war.

Similar peacekeeping forces have successfully operated around the globe from Angola to Syria, Iraq/Iran and West New Guinea.

Many people in emerging nations owe their first opportunity to cast a ballot to the UN. A recent success story is Namibia. Under South African control for the last 70 years, Namibia was oppressed by the South African government's apartheid laws.

In November of 1989, Namibians went to the polls for the first time, through their own will and the assistance of the UN. The electoral process was supervised and controlled by the UN Transition Assistance Group, preventing voter coercion. This operation involved over 8,600 people from 124 nations, assisting Namibia in gaining its independence March 21, 1990.

Since 1955, the UN has supervised or observed elections and referenda on some 40 occasions. In many of these cases, people in non-autonomous territories voted for the first time to approve national constitutions, elect representatives to constituent assemblies, or decide their future political status. On several occasions the inhabitants of disputed territories have expressed their opinions through plebiscites under UN supervision, for a peaceful resolution to the dispute in question.

Rights and wrongs

The UN treads lightly, however, on the issue of human rights. The organization has accepted a mandate to act only as an advisory body, not to force nations to act on human rights abuses. Respect for national sovereignty is extremely important to ensure nations continued participation in the UN, but leaves no means, save diplomatic pressure, to encourage a nation to correct its wrongs.



Consider South Africa and the Blacks, Canada and Native peoples, and China and Tiananmen Square. All these countries have come under pressure from the international community in UN debate, but progress has been minimal.

In spite of the slow-grinding gears of the UN, some important steps have been taken in the name of human rights. In 1948, member nations passed the Genocide Convention. A reaction to the horrors of World War Two, the Convention defines genocide and declares the international community's support for the prevention of such brutal acts in the future.

Other significant conventions that have followed include the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (1965), the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (1979), and the Convention against Torture (1984).

The most recent human rights convention to take place was the Convention on the Rights of the Child, completed on November 20, 1989. This 54-article convention seeks to guarantee children the right to life, name, nationality, and freedom of thought, conscience and religion. It represents an unprecedented attempt to address the problems of child abuse and neglect in an international treaty, and pays special attention to protection of children who are refugees, disabled or who are oppressed as minorities. As a provision of this convention, governments also committed themselves to providing primary health care and basic education.

The details of these conventions were inspired by the General Assembly's pas-

sage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948. Containing 30 articles which spell out basic civil rights, as well as fundamental economic, social and cultural rights, the Universal Declaration has been widely accepted. It is considered to carry the weight of international law and has been used by many new countries in their founding laws or constitutions.

Divided nations

Although the UN has seen the fruits of accomplishment over the years, it has suffered inherent problems. The most troubling among these is economic blackmail by the U.S. — which provides over 25 per cent of the UN's general budget. The U.S. has held back its obligatory payments when confronted with decisions that conflict with its self-perceived interest.

A 1960-64 peacekeeping mission to the Congo was aborted on the basis of insufficient funding when money promised by the U.S. was not received.

According to the Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security, the United States is responsible for roughly 50 per cent of the approximately \$1 billion debt the United Nations currently faces.

Bullying by major economic powers within the UN has also contributed to the heightening of international tensions and created conflict among member states. The best example of this is the Suez Crisis of 1956. Development funds had been promised to Egypt from the International Monetary Fund, the U.S. and Great Britain. This capital was pro-

vided to keep Egypt on a tight string to western whims. Concern over Nasser's political goals caused the U.S. and Great Britain to suddenly withdraw their funding.

The International Monetary Fund, claiming its promised aid was conditional on British and U.S. support, denied funds to Egypt. As a backlash to U.S. and British influence in the IMF's decision, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, a trade route vital to the British and French. The ensuing conflict brought the world to the brink of large-scale international conflict.

Another shortcoming of the UN has been the failure of the Security Council to ensure peace. Founded in 1948, the Security Council has only five member nations — England, France, China, the U.S.S.R. and the United States. However, it has the final word on major strategic decisions, and wields considerable influence over the General Assembly.

This was demonstrated during the Persian Gulf war, when all five Security Council members agreed to launch a U.N.-sponsored attack on Iraq, against the protests of numerous U.N. member states.

Shortly after its establishment, the Security Council became frozen in the political winter of the cold war. Despite the assumption that the permanent members of the council would have peace as a common goal, the political chasm between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. served to effectively paralyze the actions of the Security Council. Thus the Security Council remained asleep in its duty to halt the atrocities of Vietnam and Afghanistan.

The recent collapse of the Soviet Union as a superpower raises the fear that the Security Council has become another tool of the White House and its self-serving new world order. Which is the greater of two evils, a Security Council frozen in helplessness, or a Security Council justifying every U.S. action?

The lofty vision of the UN has another tragic flaw. It is unable to change situations, damned by its own principles to simply return affairs to the status quo. It is virtually impossible for the UN to alter political conflicts without the involved countries' assent. The success of the UN's involvement in Namibia could not have occurred without the consent of South Africa and the people of Namibia, for the UN must respect national sovereignty.

A current example is the UN's inability to do more than condemn the actions of the Haitian military following its overthrow of the democratically elected President Jean-Baptiste Aristide. To endorse military intervention without invitation would violate the UN Charter and international law.

There is no denying the UN has had many failures over its 46-year history, for its ideals are extremely difficult to achieve. Considering the organization is hindered by financial dependence on individual states, manipulation of its decisions by world powers, an ineffective Security Council, and the concept of state's right to sovereignty, it is clear the UN has succeeded only in a limited fashion.

Peacekeeping initiatives, democratic voting, and conventions on human rights must be seen together with the sobering fact that there is much to be accomplished in perfecting the impartiality and effectiveness of the United Nations as an international forum for the peaceful settlement of disputes.