

CANADA'S FINGERPRINTS

Louis Hamann is the United Nations bureau chief for Radio-Canada and CBC in New York. A native of Montreal, Hamann has held a number of positions in television and radio for the two organizations. Reporting from the UN for five years, he has been at the centre of coverage of the diplomatic situation over the war in Iraq as well as the investigation into the UN oil-for-food program and the ongoing push for UN reform.

I remember thinking to myself, “There is something peculiarly Canadian about all this.”

It was shortly before midnight in late March, and after more than six weeks of negotiations, the 15-member Security Council had finally approved a resolution referring suspected war criminals in Darfur to the International Criminal Court, or ICC.

Pretty amazing, given that until just hours before the vote, Washington was still threatening to veto the measure.

Canada's role, as well as that of key Canadians, could be felt just underneath the surface—“fingerprints,” as Paul Heinbecker, the former Canadian ambassador to the UN, liked to say.

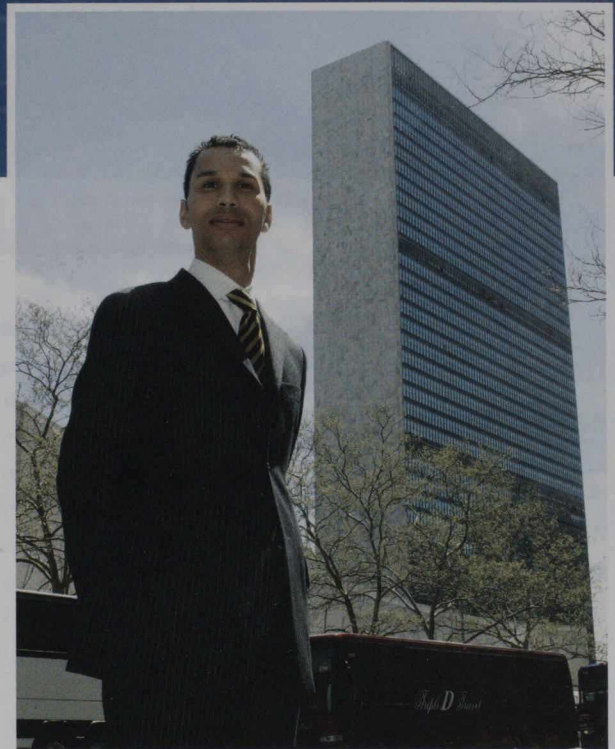
In one of those “only at the UN” moments, Security Council ambassadors had broken off talks earlier in the evening to attend a reception at a steakhouse in downtown Manhattan. By the time they made it back to UN Headquarters to vote, it was close to midnight and therefore too late for the media to make a big splash out of the historic event that had just taken place. “That’s too bad,” one media-savvy diplomat confided to me after the vote, “too bad because this is big news.”

Big news, indeed, when one considers that in the last three years,

tens of thousands of people have been killed in Darfur and more than two million others have been forced from their homes in a conflict that at times is reminiscent of what took place in the mid-1990s in Rwanda.

A year ago, I attended a ceremony here for the 10-year commemoration of the Rwandan genocide. Presiding were UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Rwandan Foreign Minister Charles Murigande, as well as two Canadians: then-Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham and retired General Roméo Dallaire, a man who knows a thing or two about genocide.

Dallaire spoke eloquently about the importance of never forgetting what happened in Rwanda and touted “the responsibility to protect” as the best way to ensure that such a shameful chapter of our history does not repeat itself. A new diplomatic concept developed at Ottawa’s initiative, the responsibility to protect says that if or when a country is unable or unwilling to protect its own citizens, the international community must act. Talk to any Canadian diplomat and chances are you’ll hear about it in the course of the conversation. Mr. Annan has called on member governments to embrace the concept as part of his UN reform proposal.



As the horrors unfolding in western Sudan became more and more apparent to the world, it was yet another Canadian, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour, who pleaded with the Security Council earlier this year to refer those suspected of grave crimes in Darfur to the ICC. As I walked with her to a studio for an interview afterward, I asked if she thought the Court was a realistic option, given Washington’s strong opposition. “This is not about the United States,” she replied, “this is about the people of Darfur.”

As I witnessed that recent late-night vote, I couldn’t help but think about the Canadian “fingerprints” that ambassador Heinbecker so often talked about. Indeed, it is difficult to ignore the role that Canada has played in ensuring that justice is done in Darfur.

And when those suspected of crimes in that conflict are finally brought before the ICC, one of the judges is to be—you guessed it—a Canadian, Philippe Kirsch, a long-time diplomat who is currently president of the Court. 🍁

Canadian broadcast journalist Louis Hamann at UN Headquarters: It is difficult to ignore the role that Canada has played in ensuring that justice is done in Darfur.

photo: Donald Emmert, Agence France Presse