

THE TEST OF HUMANITY

Paul Heinbecker is Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation and director of the Laurier Centre for Global Relations, Governance and Policy, in Waterloo. These appointments follow a career as a diplomat and senior official, including acting as chief foreign policy adviser to former prime minister Brian Mulroney. From 2000 to 2004, Mr. Heinbecker was Canada's permanent representative to the UN, where he promoted the International Criminal Court and advocated compromise on Iraq.

World leaders are failing the most fundamental test of their own humanity. Since they were told by UN Under-Secretary-General Jan Egeland in December 2003 that the situation in the Darfur region in Sudan "has quickly become one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world," tens of thousands of innocent people have died. Those leaders can redeem themselves this autumn when the most important enclave of heads of state and government since the UN was created gathers in New York to reform the organization.

Without a doubt, the most urgent issue facing them there will be not who gets a permanent seat on the Security Council, nor even how to build consensus on the potentially catastrophic nexus of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. It will be whether innocents will be saved from slaughter in Darfur, the Congo, northern Uganda and all of the other little-known or half-forgotten humanitarian crises around the world, and who will do the saving. The lives of millions of people are at stake, as is the reputation of the UN. And the outcome is anything but assured.

The UN Charter, which was written in other times and under other circumstances, has become part of the problem. The framers of the Charter, with the appalling losses of World War II fresh in their minds, decided that the best way "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" was to outlaw aggression and create a system of collective security that proscribed interference in the internal affairs of others. With some help from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and nuclear deterrence, the UN succeeded. But in recent years, while the number of conflicts between states has diminished, internal conflicts, such as those in Rwanda and now Darfur, have become the crucial issue. Nevertheless, international consensus on

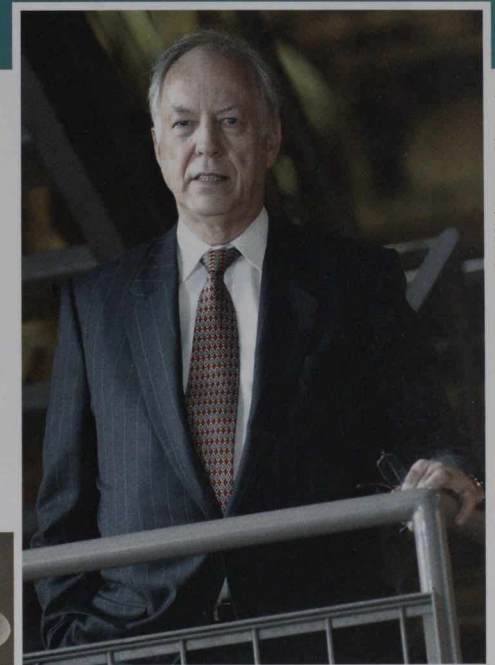
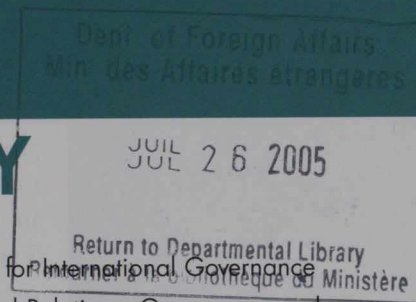


photo: courtesy of Wilfrid Laurier University



▲ Former diplomat Paul Heinbecker: Nothing is so powerful as an idea whose time has come.

photo: CP (Richard Drew)

▲ The legal view is that the UN Security Council collectively, not individual members, "owns" the decision to go to war in all cases beyond actual or pre-emptive self-defence.

the need for protective action across borders has been slow to materialize.

In 1999, after the UN sat out the Kosovo war under the threat of a Russian veto, Secretary-General Kofi Annan posed the question of how, if humanitarian intervention was indeed an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, the world should respond to such brutal inhumanity. The commission appointed by then-Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy to answer the question replied by shifting