

Ginette Ast

The View from the Gallery

■ What does the United Nations look like from the press gallery? Do journalists who have been covering events there for many years become linked to particular points of view and dismissive of other opinions? Has the United Nations suffered from an unfriendly Western press corps during, say, the last 20 years? Is there a real problem for reporters in the sheer complexity of an organization comprising 159 member-states whose delegations tend to tell the press—if they talk at all—several different versions of an event? Ginette Ast, who is CBC's producer in charge of United Nations programming, addresses these and other questions.

Ginette began at the United Nations in 1966 as an editorial assistant on the *Los Angeles Times*, and moved to the CBC a year later, just before the Six-Day War in the Middle East. "I was thrown into this office, and there were masses of people here. We were going live day and night, television mainly. For me it was quite frightening, because I had never worked in this kind of a business."

She soon found her feet, and for many years has been in charge of the office, operating it as a clearing-house for CBC and Radio-Canada (her first language is French) for news stories and documentaries on all the international issues coming out of the UN. She suggests stories to the Corporation's various desks and makes sure they know what is happening. "I am fortunate enough to have a range of outlets, not necessarily news, but there are shows like 'Sunday Morning' and 'Présent Dimanche' and 'Le Point' [that] do interviews on something that does not necessarily thrill every person in New York City. And sometimes I am a part of an important story outside—say, the famine in Africa—and crews go there; so it won't have a UN dateline. A lot of my American colleagues have a problem, because they have very few outlets, except for the pure news-desks."

Nevertheless, she has noted "a clear decline" in Canadian media interest in the UN. "Look at the print media. There used to be a number of Canadian correspondents here, but no more. And you can't cover the UN from Washington. It's very difficult to cover this place unless you are here every day. You cannot come in here cold, on a deadline, and expect to get the story *in toto*. You will get one point of view, maybe two. It is a complex place, very complex, because of the personalities and because of the nature of diplomacy. You are dealing with diplomats; they are not politicians, except for a few people like Ambassador [Stephen] Lewis. Your classic diplomat will be very careful before he or she will speak to a journalist. So what happens is a lot of people clip newspapers—*The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—and they will have seen names mentioned in those stories. The same names end up being their sources when they come to do the story. It's a vicious cycle, because you cannot hit and run on UN stories.

"There's another problem at the level of the UN *per se*. The UN is not used to dealing with—I have to be careful how I phrase this—a very aggressive, hardnosed press corps. A lot of UN officials don't even know how a newsroom works. A lot of UN officials come from societies where the press is viewed in a certain way. I'm not saying that our way is necessarily the ultimate best. All this is part of the complexity of UN coverage.