

Chapter 3

MULTILATERAL AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION

The United Nations

While member states of the United Nations were reflecting on the theme "1986, the Year of Peace," the organization itself was embarking on what proved to be a difficult but worthwhile review of its methods, programs and priorities. The financial crisis of November 1985 weighed heavily over the United Nations, forcing it to take immediate and severe corrective measures by reducing the operating budget, imposing a recruitment freeze and reducing the duration of, or postponing or cancelling, certain conferences and meetings.

The main achievements of the United Nations during 1986-87 related to Africa, disarmament and the advancement of women. Particularly noteworthy was the Special Session of the General Assembly on the critical situation in Africa, which led to fresh and better co-ordinated efforts by African governments, donor countries and the UN and other multilateral agencies.

There was also substantial progress internally. At the Fortieth Session of the General Assembly in 1985, it was decided to form a group of 18 experts to review the efficiency of the administration and the financial operation of the UN organization. Their report, which was submitted in June 1986, was approved by the Forty-first Session of the General Assembly in December. It contained some seventy recommendations, relating to the intergovernmental structure, the structure of the secretariat, personnel, program monitoring and evaluation procedures, and systems and procedures pertaining to budget planning and preparation. The reform agenda is quite lengthy. If the reforms succeed, this could radically change the way in which the United Nations and its member states view and discuss these serious common problems. It is still too early to assess the proposed reforms or to evaluate the likelihood of their succeeding. However, although the road to reconstruction promises to be long and arduous, there is cause to view it with some optimism. The past 12 months have demonstrated at least three things: the United Nations has more strength and flexibility than it was credited with having; it still has the support of its member states, not one of which has withdrawn from membership; and pragmatism is the order of the day. Both critics and advocates of the multilateral system have agreed to discuss and decide together how the United Nations might be improved and strengthened.

Canada has played a lead role in United Nations reform. Speaking before the General Assembly on September 24, the Secretary of State for External Affairs underscored the need for reform and the importance of the member states

making a sincere and strong commitment to the UN. Canada, for its part, would continue to make the most positive possible contribution. One month later Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, who had just met with the Secretary-General, pointed out that reform should go hand in hand with finding a solution to the UN's financial problems. In March, Canada was elected chairman of the social affairs committee of ECOSOC and in that role became closely involved in another reform exercise, focussed on the UN Specialized Agencies and intergovernmental structure.

Politically, this was an active year for Canada and its representatives at the United Nations. In the context of South Africa and Namibia, Canada took steps to assure that the Nassau initiative of the Commonwealth Heads of Government would be taken up by the UN. Although not a member of the Security Council this year, Canada decided to intervene in the Council's debates to point out that it would continue to press South Africa for genuine social reform, for its co-operation in bringing Namibia to independence and for the cessation of hostile and unprovoked activities against its neighbours.

On Central America and Nicaragua, Canada supported the General Assembly resolution seeking compliance with the International Court of Justice decision which had laid down a series of measures to protect Nicaragua from outside intervention. This vote also served as a reminder that Canada unreservedly supports the provisions of international law and recognizes the authority of the International Court of Justice. Canada also took the opportunity to point out that Nicaragua itself had not fully complied with certain international legal norms: its anti-Somozista tribunals, in particular, had been commented on in the latest Amnesty International report.

During discussions on the Middle East, Canada's position on the proposal for an international conference on the Middle East evolved somewhat during the year. Thus Canada decided at this General Assembly to abstain rather than vote against the resolution to hold a conference. Recent events in the region had indicated that such a conference, especially if it were well prepared, might contribute toward a lasting peace. However, Canada's position was that the countries directly concerned should be the ones to determine how the conference should be held and what its agenda should be.

Canada took advantage of the Assembly debate on Afghanistan strongly to reiterate opposition to the USSR's occupation of that country and its treatment of the local population.