

tempt to bolster the USSR's previously mediocre reputation at the UN is undoubtedly a reflection of Mikhail Gorbachev's initiatives and his support of multilateralism. By increasing its commitment to the UN, both morally and financially, the Soviet Union is opening up numerous possible roles for the UN in the future. For example, the UN could figure in the removal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, these troops being a constant source of frustration for Gorbachev. The UN is also an arena in which the Soviet Union can test its arms control policies and proposals prior to bilateral talks with the US. Strong Soviet support of the UN also puts pressure on the United States to reverse its diminishing support for such international bodies.

The UN does not have the prestige it once had, and in recent years it has suffered greatly from external criticism. It is important to look back at the development of the financial crisis, which has been at the heart of much of the pessimism. In late 1985 the United States chose to withhold a large part of its assessed share of the UN regular budget. Assessed at US\$210 million out of a total budget of US\$841 million, the US contended either that other nations should pay a greater share or the UN should adopt a voting system weighted in favor of those who contribute the most. Despite a softening of the Reagan administration's stance and a request by Reagan to Congress to reinstate its full share of the UN budget, the US Congress gave only US\$100 million in 1986, and again in 1987. As one delegate noted, it will be extremely difficult to reinstate support for the UN among members of the US Congress after the Reagan administration spent five years convincing them of its weaknesses. The recent stock market crash and subsequent pressure to slash the US budgetary deficit also suggest that it will be difficult for the administration to get Congress to pass the full US assessment.

#### **A bargain**

*The regular budget amounted to US\$841 million in 1987. That's less than the cost of the New York City's Police Department. The total budget of the UN, including the cost of UNEP, UNESCO, UNDP, FAO, ICAO and WHO, amounted to US\$4.1 billion. That is less than one dollar for every inhabitant of this planet; it is roughly 5 percent of the budget of the Canadian government; it is roughly half the cost of Canada's armed forces. And the UN is supposed to guarantee world peace, feed the starving, protect the environment, and so on. The United Nations is a bargain.*

#### **US estrangement**

US critics of the UN object to the fact that the absolute size of their contribution is larger than that of any other nation. While true, this statement is misleading. The assessment process agreed upon by member states of the UN several years ago reflects the "capacity of a nation to pay." The statistics used to derive a nation's assessment come from its per capita GNP. In this manner, the average salary of individuals in a country is compared to that country's GNP and population size. Using these statistics, the United States is ranked 86th in its assessed contribution to the UN regular budget. Some of the poorest nations on earth are paying proportionately more. Since a minimum assessment of .01 percent of the UN regular budget is required for membership, individuals from Togo or the Central African Republic end up paying a greater proportion of their income than those in the US or Canada.

While the financial crunch felt over the past two years has been extremely serious, it has also inspired a defence of the UN by many nations (Canada's Ambassador to the UN, Stephen Lewis, led a dynamic effort.) Finally, some might say, things are getting done. There now exists a clearer idea of the importance of this multi-lateral body, and a greater sense of its direction and purpose.

Because of its size and complexity and the scale of its tasks, the UN still faces problems: continued financial turmoil, a turn for the worse in the African economic situation, conflict in the Middle East and apartheid in South Africa. However, the UN might now be a little more adept at coping with these problems. While past energies were often directed at diplomatic posturing which resulted in confrontation and lack of action, we might be starting to see the UN act in a slightly more decisive manner. As a beginning, the positive momentum witnessed at the 42nd session of the General Assembly this past fall has given the UN a slight and much needed boost. §



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