

United Nations Association-UK  
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Acceptance of the Sir Brian Urquhart Award for Distinguished Service to the United Nations

Charles Petrie

I am honoured to be this year's recipient of the Sir Brian Urquhart Award for Distinguished Service to the UN. I am also extremely grateful for the association's willingness to accommodate the challenge that one faces living in the Middle East today. I wish I could be with you to share these words, but the current situation has rendered the possibility of leaving Jordan with a guarantee of return too uncertain.

I am particularly humbled by this award. Humbled by the idea that my, at times disruptive, contribution to the workings of the UN could be seen as distinguished service. I am doubly honoured to be given an award carrying the name of Sir Brian Urquhart, as both he and Sidney, his wife, were very good friends of my parents. As I was growing up, I had a number of opportunities to listen to him and seek his guidance especially in the early years of my UN career.

I remember one particular moment in early 1994. I had just come out of Mogadishu. I was still reeling from being subjected to the wrath of the system for having written directly to the then Secretary General a long letter entitled The Death of a Noble Cause. A letter that basically explained that the failure in Somalia was to a significant part of our own making and that some people, somewhere, at some point in time in the future were going inevitably to pay the price. It was still a few months before the plane was shot down in Kigali, when I met Sir Brian. I wasn't sure I had done the right thing sending the message. I asked Sir Brian if I had. His response was absolutely. I should always remember that I was not working for the United Nations, but with the United Nations. A piece of advice that has guided me throughout my career in the UN and even my interactions with it afterwards.

Though it may not have always seemed to be the case, I fundamentally believe in the importance of the United Nations. The UN, for me, is an institutional fairytale. It is the fairytale that believes the world can be made into a better place. The UN Charter embodies that fairytale. In the world as it is today, it is essential to retain the belief that it is possible for governments and people to work together to make it that better place. The UN as an institutional fairytale must survive for the good of humanity.

We are in a world today where multilateralism is under serious threat. One of the greatest concerns has to be the perversion and rejection of a rules based international system. We are seeing the re-emergence of a particularly cynical, opportunistic, almost Darwinian, form of world order. We have been there before. How many today remember the iconic image of Emperor Haile Selassie pleading at the League of Nations for support against Italy's invasion of his country. History is repeating itself.

It is true that the institution of the UN can be no more effective than its membership of 193 countries allows it to be. But how many times have I heard this refrain that at times almost comes across as an excuse? However stacked the world order is against the

institution of the UN, is the organisation itself doing enough to equip itself to confront the challenges?

I was one of the authors of an investigation into the UN's actions in the last year of the civil war in Sri Lanka. The Secretary General at the time, Ban-ki Moon, courageously accepted the findings of the report. The main findings were the dysfunctionality of a system that was not able to develop and implement a coherent overall strategy, and the lack of an overall authority empowered with the responsibility to calibrate the different components of a UN response. Possibly the most damning finding was that significant parts of the UN did not see the protection of victims as a part of their mandate. Basically, a technocratised UN had lost its understanding of the responsibilities entrusted to it by its Charter.

Though not uniformly well received, the report made an impact, and one would have hoped that it would have triggered some necessary changes. Unfortunately, the same systemic failures were identified in the UN's inaction in Myanmar some ten years later. Former Foreign Minister of Guatemala, Gert Rosenthal, was tasked with undertaking that review. He stated that his findings were nothing more than a reiteration of the findings contained in the report on Sri Lanka. Ten years later, nothing had changed.

But that's not true, something had fundamentally changed. Whereas in Sri Lanka the UN played a central role in the international community's response, in Myanmar the international community worked around the UN's inaction. The UN risked becoming irrelevant on the ground.

This erosion of UN relevance on the ground is even more evident today. Earlier this year I crossed into Myanmar from Thailand with one of the ethnic armed groups. I wanted to get a better sense of the governance structures that were emerging in the spaces vacated by the retreating Myanmar military. I spent almost six weeks travelling through one of the embattled regions, Karenni, listening to a new generation of activists whose formative years had been the relative openness the country had gone through from 2011 to 2021. A generation who intriguingly had more in common with their peers, whether in Myanmar or internationally, than they did with their parents. I would argue that what I saw in Myanmar was the first successfully sustained rebellion against an oppressive regime since the Arab Spring. But that is for another day's discussion.

When in Myanmar, I heard very little mention of the UN, the organisation just rarely came up in any discussions, and when it did what was said wasn't positive. Initially, I tried to explain the constraints the organization operated under, its delicate balancing of engagement with the military government with its attempts to access vulnerable areas the military did not control. But the more I saw of what was happening in Karenni, the more I realized the UN's absence was inexcusable.

I met the Myanmar UN country team when I returned to Thailand. I quickly realised that it was basically an orphaned structure. The lessons from my and Gert Rosenthal's reports continued to be ignored by the leadership in New York. There had not been a Resident Coordinator to lead the system in country since the beginning of the violence on 1 February 2021. A series of O-I-Cs meant that the individuals assuming the responsibility had had to balance the implementation of their individual agency

mandates with the need to make strong demarches on behalf of the UN system and the broader humanitarian community. Abandoned by New York and not equipped to deal with such responsibilities, the individuals unfailingly avoided confrontation as much as they could and prioritised the operations of their agencies.

I dwell on Myanmar as what I found in Karenni was an opportunity for the UN to make a fundamental difference. Were UN leadership to be present there existed on the ground a network of effective civil society leaders and a new generation of activists with whom to collaborate that would have allowed the UN to have a disproportionately positive impact on the country's future.

But to be able to seize such opportunities there needs to be effective leadership. What form of leaders does the UN foster and promote today? Is it a cadre of individuals who are determined to retain the advantages of working for the organisation or is it individuals who understand the responsibilities and expectations that come from working with the organisation?

To some extent the reform of the Resident Coordinator system has allowed a new more dynamic generation to enter the organisation. I continue to be used as a mentor for a number of them and in the process observe how much these individuals find themselves battling the inertia of the system and the lack of cooperation of other UN agencies.

Of course, the valiant attempts of UN colleagues on the ground to continue providing aid to the Palestinians is an example of the UN striving to live up to its mandated responsibilities. But there are still within the organisation too many individuals who give truth to the statement that 'all you need is for good people to do nothing for evil to triumph'. Too many individuals have transferred their sense of individual responsibility to some perceived logic of the institution and in this manner are able to find comfort in doing nothing.

So, what needs to happen:

1. The recommendations of the Sri Lanka and Myanmar reports must be operationalized. In contexts of complex political crises with major humanitarian implications, the UN Secretary General needs to appoint senior officials to oversee the elaboration and implementation of an all-of-the-system response in support of the UN Resident Coordinators on the ground.
2. Greater support needs to be provided to the reform of the UN Resident Coordinator system by allowing it to access assessed contributions.
3. The UN's unique role as the custodian of international norms and standards needs to be given much greater prominence. There is a need to understand that this is the UN's competitive edge rather than many of the service delivery functions that are becoming increasingly less cost efficient when compared to other organisations.
4. Following from the preceding point, the organisation and its agencies need to be streamlined. There is too much duplication of effort within the UN and

between UN Agencies, which leads to pointless time-consuming destructive turf infighting among agencies.

Unfortunately, it is probably asking a lot of the organisation in its current state to implement the points above. But something has to be done to counter the UN's slow death as a result of progressive budget cuts. The organisation is atrophying.

I acknowledge that my words may come across as harsh and unfair. But like all of you listening, I sincerely care about the organisation and the contribution it is meant to make to the establishment of a more principled world order.

I wish to end this intervention with these words from Sir Brian Urquhart:

“I think idealism is the only form of realism because unless you're idealistic, you don't have anything to look forward to, you don't have anywhere to go. We are only on this world once as far as we know. We might as well make the best of it.”

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