

Of paramount interest?

In June 1945, India's princely states sent a single representative to sign the Charter of the United Nations at the San Francisco conference, a charter that realised Alfred Tennyson's poem where he called for a "Parliament of man, Federation of the world." "There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe, and the kindly earth shall slumber, lapped in universal law," Tennyson wrote in his work, 'Locksley Hall', spelling out his vision for a world where the "war-drum throbb'd no longer, and the battle flags were furled."

The poem was famously carried by U.S. President Harry Truman in his wallet, which he called his inspiration as the UN Charter was being drafted. A. Ramaswami Mudaliar, then the Dewan of Mysore added prose to that poetry as he spoke on behalf of undivided India with the words, "There is one great reality... which all religions teach... the dignity of the common man."

As the bitterly divided Indian and Pakistani delegations stood up over the past week to face each other more than 70 years later, however, all those words rang hollow. Reality was in short supply, as even the photograph brandished by Pakistan's envoy Maleeha Lodhi as being from Jammu and Kashmir turned out to be from Gaza; religion became cause to divide rather than build a common understanding, and the dignity of the United Nations, let alone the common man, disappeared as each side used its multiple rights of reply for name-calling and rhetoric hurled at the other. Of course, the India-Pakistan word-war was outdone by the U.S. and North Korea who sparred over Pyongyang's latest provocations.

However, it wasn't the language employed that made the UN's 72nd General Assembly one of its most disappointing sessions, but the picture of the UN's ineffectiveness on each of the issues confronting the world today, that were spelt out by the Secretary General António Guterres in his speech on September 19. "We are a world in pieces, we need to be a world at peace," he said, listing the world's seven biggest threats: nuclear peril, terrorism, unresolved conflicts and violations of international humanitarian law, climate change, growing inequality, cyber warfare and misuse of artificial intelligence, and human mobility, or refugees. Even a cursory glance shows that each of these issues saw little movement at the UNGA.

To begin with, the UN's actions in response to North Korea's missiles and nuclear tests just amounted to another round of sanctions against the Kim Jong-un regime. Past history points to the slim chances of success of this tack. Since 1966, the UN Security Council has established 26 sanctions regimes, of which about half are still active. In some cases, the sanctions only squeezed the country's poor, as in Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia) and DPRK itself, while not changing its belligerent positions. In most cases, the misery was heightened by international military interventions, from Yugoslavia to Libya and Yemen. Even the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, against which the U.S. and Russia united to pass a slew of economic, political and travel sanctions in the 1990s, didn't change course on its support to al-Qaeda or its brutal treatment of women and minorities. The truth is that sanctions do not work on rogue states; they only help isolate their populations from the world, which in turn tightens the regime's stranglehold on its people, and strengthens its resolve to disregard the UN.

In addition, to those who may just consider, as Libya did, to relinquish nuclear weapons, the fact that NATO destroyed Libya anyway is a disincentive. The UN has done itself no favours by failing to censure NATO on violating its mandate only to the responsibility to protect (R2P) and not for regime change in Libya in 2011. To other countries that may enter talks, as Iran did, the imminent threat from the U.S. of walking out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (P5+1 agreement) would make them question the efficacy of the UN in guaranteeing any deal struck. Other decisions of the Trump administration in the U.S., to walk out of the climate change agreement as well as

threaten to cancel its funding contributions to the UN, have also seen little comment from the world body, which further reduces the respect it is viewed with.

Nowhere is that lack of respect more obvious than regarding Myanmar, where the military junta faced sanctions for years. Despite inviting former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to prepare a report on Rakhine state, post-democracy Myanmar has been able to carry out one of the region's most frightening massacres just days after the report was submitted. On the basis of satellite pictures, and eyewitness accounts, the UN Human Rights chief called military action a "textbook case of ethnic cleansing", as half a million Rohingya fled for their lives from Rakhine villages that were then burnt down, with landmines laid along the border to Bangladesh to prevent their return. The Security Council will now meet on Thursday to consider the situation, but it is short on ideas and late on action, and restoring more than a million stateless refugees to their homes seems a daunting task, even for a world-body that was set up expressly to ensure that such a displacement would "never again" be allowed to occur.

A similar impotency has been imparted to the UN on the issue of terrorism. India's grievances here are justified and are a symptom of the UN's powerlessness to enforce even the basic strictures against terrorists it sanctions, given that Hafiz Saeed and associates now plan to stand for public office in Pakistan, while others like Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, who received bail despite UN financial sanctions, have simply disappeared. Meanwhile India struggles to convince China to allow the Security Council to sanction Masood Azhar, whose release in exchange for hostages in 1999 should have been proof enough of his perfidy.

Mr. Guterres's concerns about what he calls the "dark side of innovation" are valid, and the world is seeing an increasing number of cyber-attacks, especially from non-state actors. But the UN must do more to act on attacks carried out by states, especially those that are permanent members of the Security Council. Both Russia and the U.S. have been known to use cyber warfare, but equally the use of new-age warfare — drones, robotic soldiers and remote killings — must see more regulation from the international community.

Solving the world's inequalities, the last point on his list, where Mr. Guterres pointed out that "eight men represent as much of the world's wealth as half of all humanity", will be a harder and harder task for the UN, where member countries speak only of putting themselves "first".

Clearly the vision of the UN dreamt by Tennyson or Mudaliar or any of the leaders over time has far to go. The important issue is the road it employs, and the respect the institution is accorded, not just as a structure at New York's 42nd Street, but a shared ideal. This was summed up best by the UN's first Secretary General, Trygve Lie, who ran an equally divided forum and finally resigned from his post in 1952 saying, "The United Nations will not work effectively if it is used merely as forum for destructive propaganda. Neither will it work if it is used only as a convenience when national interests are directly involved, and regarded with indifference, or bypassed or opposed, when the general world interest is paramount."

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