

## Ambassador Holbrooke Delivers IRC-UK 2005 Annual Lecture

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**London, UK 28 Jun 2005** - *Richard C. Holbrooke was guest speaker at International Rescue Committee, UK's Fourth Annual Lecture at the Royal Geographical Society in London on 28th June. A former US Ambassador to the United Nations and former IRC Board Member, Ambassador Holbrooke's address, The UN, the US and the World, was a lively, personal view of the history and current state and possible future direction of the United Nations and its agencies. His remarks, very well received by the large audience, were all the more pertinent coming as they did just two days after the 60th anniversary of the signing of the UN Charter in June 1945.*



Photo: Neila Sheikh/IRC-UK

### **THE UN, THE US AND THE WORLD**

I like this topic - the US, the UN and the World allows me to talk about absolutely anything, but before that I first want to talk about the International Rescue Committee because I was a Board Member, my wife, a refugee herself, is a Board Member, and it is a great organisation. It does the work of, and for governments and usually better and more efficiently. The dedication of its staff is enormous and I am proud to be associated with it. You should all know that you are supporting a great institution.

Before I talk about the United Nations, I also want to say a word about the issue itself - refugees. I don't know how many of you have ever been in a refugee camp, but those of you who have, will understand the fundamental point about refugees - they are human beings - farmers, pharmacists, teachers, garage mechanics and so on, but they have been dehumanised by becoming refugees. Living in straw huts or blue UNHCR tents, they are waiting for handouts; they have lost their identity. When you visit refugee camps, you see this - they are not faceless, but they have lost part of their identity. That is the most dehumanising thing imaginable, and it is easy just to turn away. But these are people just like you and me, except they happen to have been caught in the hell of a disaster and 90 per cent of the time, that disaster is man-made. The Tsunami was, of course, a dramatic exception and the subsequent outpouring of international aid was the greatest in history, of which all of us should be proud. The IRC itself has been a major force in the Tsunami relief effort, particularly in Aceh. But most refugees are not created by natural disasters but by human causes. Darfur, the Sudan in general, the Congo, Angola, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, Kosovo, Thailand (where many of us saw our first refugee camps on the Thai/Cambodian Border in the late 70s), have all been avoidable tragedies.

But here is the real issue: two thirds of the refugees in the world are not accepted by the UNHCR as refugees because they have not managed to cross an international border. In UN bureaucratic lingo they are called IDPs, Internally Displaced Persons. Internally Displaced Persons are refugees who have not had the energy, or the good luck, to get across a border. In Angola during the 36 year civil war which was only ended by Savimbi's death two years ago, there were 4 million people that I would call refugees, but whom the UN would not accept responsibility for because they were still inside Angola. This goes back to the origins of the UN Charter signed 60 years ago and the UN protocol creating the UNHCR. There were some flaws and some conceptual problems with it, and one of them was that the Soviet Union, in particular, said anything internal should not concern the UN.

Over time that boundary has eroded somewhat, but not for refugees. The Refugee Convention still says that an Internally Displaced Person does not come under the UN. While the IRC does work in internally displaced areas, the UN does not and that is a terrible mistake. For the most obvious reasons, the international community has made no effort to address this problem: if you undertake responsibility for IDPs it will double or triple the financial commitment. When I visited an Angolan camp in an area north of Luanda a few years ago they didn't even have blue tarps to live under, no blue tents, just cardboard. They were trying to live in World Food Programme cardboard boxes, which of course meant that the minute it rained, their shelter was gone. The same in Darfur - 150,000 refugees got into Chad, and that 150,000 came under the UNHCR, but not those left behind in Darfur itself. They receive aid from a combination of NGOs led by the IRC and Save the Children and from other UN agencies such as the World Food Programme, which distributes food, most of which is American. But UNHCR is not operating inside Darfur in the way it should and this is a serious problem, one to which I think the IRC should pay more attention, by lobbying the UN and individual governments. The situation will only change if the two leading member states of the UN, the US and the UK take a lead.

This is a good way back into the subject that I wanted to talk about - the UN, the US and the World. I want to explain a little bit about what the UN is and what it is not, and also to explain why it is so controversial in the United States. Let me start with events beginning with the signing of the charter in San Francisco 60 years ago yesterday. To say the peoples of the world signed the Charter is not strictly accurate as it was the representatives of only 50 nations who signed the Charter, none of whom or maybe one of whom, was African, and none of whom were from South Asia. Fifty nations signed the Charter, and three of those nations were actually one nation, the Soviet Union, because Stalin had bargained for three seats at the UN. So not only did the USSR get a seat, but so did Belarus and Ukraine, at a time when they hardly represented independent nations. The battle over the charter set the stage for everything that followed. It was a tremendously intense battle, and the charter was essentially written by American officials with an assist from the British and a few others, notably Jan Smuts of South Africa. The idealism of the charter came almost entirely from Washington. Churchill was very ambivalent about the UN, but it was important to Churchill, it was important to Roosevelt, it was important to Truman, so the British Government went along. Stalin was

not really in favour of the UN, but he saw that the Anglo-American alliance wanted it, so he set out to limit its authority. But all the founding parties, above all the Americans, this whole generation, Churchill, Roosevelt, Truman, and everyone who went to San Francisco had lived through and understood the failure of the League of Nations. So they created, in addition to the General Assembly, the Security Council. Now the General Assembly, which currently has 191 members, almost four times its original number, is really an empty room of talk. Even the architecture in the General Assembly building is deadening, and with that vast ceiling and those high marble facades, the voice disappears. You can hear better on television, but if you are sitting in the hall, you have to put on the translator's earpiece, because otherwise it is almost inaudible. The General Assembly was designed by architects in another era for a different time. It diminishes human beings. When I was ambassador to the UN I simply hated going into it. I only talked a few times from the podium, because it was a waste of time. It is a place where Heads of Government go to make formal speeches which they video tape and show to the people back home. Nothing that happens in the General Assembly matters, although in the old days it was widely described as the parliament of man. I grew up in New York and I watched those buildings going up. My parents believed in the original dream of the UN. They used to take me there, and we would look at the General Assembly, and think that this was where the people of the world, where mankind (that now politically incorrect phrase of an earlier era) came together to discuss their problems. Of course, none of that is true. What happens in the General Assembly really doesn't matter. It has become an empty platform for ridiculous anti-Israeli resolutions that ritualistically pass by overwhelming amounts, and which the world then disregards, while the Palestinian Authority trumpets to their people, that the world has once again voted say, 130 to 10, to condemn the Israelis. This has done great damage to the UN, internationally and particularly in the US.

But the really important point is that Roosevelt, Churchill and company knew that they could not let the General Assembly make decisions because even when there were only 50 countries involved you could not have one country one vote. Today there are countries in the UN with populations as small as 10,000. It is fine for Tuvalu and Kiribati, for St. Kitts, Nevis and Anguilla to be in the General Assembly, but one cannot give them the same voting power as the great countries of the world and expect the UN to function.

Hence the Security Council. Originally with 11 members and now 15, there is currently a massive debate underway about its enlargement. The Security Council was, from the beginning, designed to be the place, to use the phrase from 1945, for the World's policemen. An interesting footnote is that the planners originally thought there would only be four permanent members, the US, the UK, the Soviet Union and China. The French were added as an American afterthought, an afterthought which the current administration would probably deeply regret if they knew anything about the history. The concept of the Security Council was very good and for all of the UN's problems, and I will get to those in a minute, the fact is that to an extent it has worked. The Security Council is recognised around the world and especially by the government in the UK, as the legitimising body for the use of force, except in response to an immediate attack. That is not to say that countries all respect that, and do not go to war unless they have approval

from the Security Council. It is not just the Coalition in Iraq that ignored the Security Council and went to war without authority. It has been done time and time again by other countries, but nevertheless the Security Council does play a very important role in the world. It helps to raise forces, it gives a moral authority to interventions and it is conceptually a very smart idea.

There are three other elements of the UN that I want to mention, in order to give its full dimensions, and here I want to stress that while everybody talks about the UN, it is not an organisation like a corporation, or a football team, or a business of some sort. The UN is simply a set of buildings in New York, in Geneva and elsewhere, where diplomats from 191 countries and a lot of bureaucrats assemble and talk. The UN is no better or worse than the sum of the governments in it. The ambassadors there just follow instructions. Even the best of them, and one of the best I ever worked with is a member of IRC-UK's board, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, who sat next to me for the year and a half I was at the UN and with whom I had a lot of fun passing notes as we debated. Even he, just like myself, just like all ambassadors there, was essentially under instructions.

To attack the UN is like attacking a football stadium for the performance of the team in it. The UN is just a building and that is the fundamental mistake that many conservative Americans have made and continue to make, attacking the UN as though it is a proactive anti-American institution. For example with regard to Iraq, it was not the UN that refused to support the Anglo-American Resolution in the Spring of 2003. It was not the UN that failed to support it, it was an Anglo-American diplomatic failure to get the 9 votes and to prevent the veto threat of the Russians and the French. But it was easy for people in Washington to blame the UN although it was not the UN's fault. It was something that happened in the building on the East River in New York City, I cannot stress this too highly and it is something that people nowadays simply do not understand. If you supported the war you can be angry at the French or the Russians or if you think they were right to oppose it you can think they did a terrific job, but either way it was not the UN. It was the governments in Berlin, in Paris, in Moscow (and in Beijing who also was opposed to the war, but who hung back). And it was a profound diplomatic miscalculation by London and Washington.

But returning to an earlier point I have so far only mentioned two of the five elements in the UN - the General Assembly and the Security Council. There are also the specialised agencies, of which the most important is the one that the IRC supports, the UN High Commission on Refugees. There are also UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Food Programme, WHO, UN Aids, UNFPA, UNIFEM, the UN University and hundreds of other lesser organisations which are tremendously important and which would exist with or without the UN structure, but which work better if they come under an umbrella. Some are very good, some are not so good, but in aggregate they are indispensable. The UNHCR is the most important for reasons which are clear, especially to everyone here who supports the International Rescue Committee. If you ask the UNHCR which is the most important NGO in the world, they will tell you immediately it is the International Rescue Committee.

The fourth element, after the General Assembly, the Security Council and the specialised agencies is the UN Bureaucracy. That consists of around 10,000 people worldwide, maybe more counting in contract people, and it is an absolute mess. When we talk about reforming the UN that is what we are primarily talking about. It has Civil Service status, and people spend all their time in meetings, stalemating and neutralising each other. There are a handful of great people in it, like the Brazilian, the late Sergio Viero De Mello, who was killed in Baghdad and who was the greatest UN official any of us ever knew, and Mark Malloch Brown, who was head of UNDP and has now moved on to be Kofi Annan's chief of staff. But for every Mark Malloch Brown, there are dozens of people who just should not be working there but who cannot be fired. The system is full of nation-balancing people who are given jobs by quotas and through nepotism. It is a very depressing situation, because the conservatives can use the inefficiencies as a metaphor for the whole organisation, and then try to kill the organisation off, instead of reforming it. That is the key point. Then in the middle of this problem came the Oil for Food Scandal. It is a complicated story but the Oil for Food Programme was a living, walking example of the kind of inefficiencies and incompetencies and in this case even corruption that I am talking about in the bureaucracy.

Finally the fifth element, the Secretary General himself, now Kofi Annan, the seventh Secretary General of the United Nations. His second term will end in a year and a half, and until recently he has done an excellent job. But he has got himself into tremendous difficulty over the Oil for Food Programme. His best period was when Clinton was president and the relationship between the Clinton administration and Kofi Annan produced many major events in Bosnia, Kosovo and elsewhere, and major reform of the UN and its finances. But when the new administration came in with its combination of ambivalence and hostility towards the UN, the result was that the UN suffered greatly. In the Charter, signed 60 years ago, the Secretary General was described simply as the Chief Administrative Officer of the UN and that is all. He does not have the powers granted to the President of the United States in the Constitution, he is just the administrative officer and his authority is dependent on his or her ability to muster support. There are tons of committees, the Budget Committee, a special committee which oversees the Budget, little cliques in the UN which do everything they can to hold them back. So if the Secretary General wants to create a single new job with the title of Assistant Secretary General of the UN, he has to get a consensus (and in UN-speak consensus means unanimity) from the General Assembly after going through three other layers where people will fight it, arguing in all night sessions about the tiniest details which should be delegated to the Secretary General.

So those are the five elements of the UN, the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Specialised Agencies, (a gold star for them at least in theory), the Bureaucracy, (lots of demerits for them) and the Secretary General, (the quality depending on who it is). The next Secretary General will come from Asia, as the position rotates by region, Africa has had three terms, Boutros-Ghali one and Kofi Anan two and before them was, of course, Perez de Cuellar and before him Kurt Waldheim. So it will be an Asian next. One footnote is that the UN is divided into regional blocks, and the Asia block, as defined by the UN, is most unfortunate. It has an enormous range of space, running from the

Mediterranean, including Syria and Lebanon, all the way east into the South Pacific. It does not however, include Australia and New Zealand, which are part of the European block, as are the United States and Canada. When I was Ambassador, we tried to join the Latin American block with Canada and the US. The Latin Americans said, We don't want to have you because.... they did not want to have to share the jobs allocated to the Latin American region with the US and Canada. Similarly, the Asians do not want Australia and New Zealand to count against their regional area. There are many of these old legacies, which are hard to break up, but should be broken up. Another footnote is that for 40 years Israel was the only country excluded from any regional block, because the Asian block didn't want them in, as it included most of the Arab countries. Finally in the year 2000, the Western European block was persuaded to take them in on a temporary basis, so Israel, along with Canada, the US, Australia and New Zealand, are all members of the European block. But the UN has its own language; temporary in UN-speak means permanent and vice versa. My title of Permanent Representative of the United States to the UN, meant temporary. Consensus means unanimity, urge means beg, demand means request, insist means please it is all diplomat lingo. But in the end, a good strong resolution is possible. If you pass a resolution saying, The Security Council will use all means necessary, that means you can go to war, as in the all means necessary resolutions for Afghanistan after 9/11 in 2001, and for Desert Storm in 1991. All means necessary resolutions will lead to successful outcomes, because they mean the will of the Security Council, speaking for all the peoples, will usually prevail.

So what do we make of this institution? I said I wanted briefly to address what is going on in the US. The United States public, contrary to widespread assumptions, are supportive of the UN. But its opponents are very noisy people. They are really extremely noisy, and they control Fox and a lot of other outlets, and have created the impression that the UN is adversarial to American national interests. This is nonsense, and I am glad that this virus has not spread to the UK. If our administration had made a greater effort to explain the value of the UN, this would not have happened. In fact, even in Iraq, the UN was indispensable to the coalition in at least two dramatic ways, and I think Jeremy Greenstock would not disagree with this. The UN representative in Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello who was killed, was the person who persuaded Ayatollah Sistani to support the elections. Those elections, which were one of the few good things that have happened in Iraq, were a resolve of the UN, and the elections themselves were arranged, conceived and overseen by the UN Election Unit. In Washington however, and around the country, people still do not support to the UN. They still do not give it credit, and now a tremendous battle has broken out over the nomination of the next American Ambassador to the UN.

In the United States there are, broadly speaking, three groups of people, and I want to stress this point. There is a well-intentioned group of people who love the UN, regardless of its problems, pro-UN, warts and all. They tend to collect people who believe in the UN without admitting its faults. On the other side are the people who just want to destroy the UN. This is not a new battle, it has been going on a long time, but it has just reached a new and vicious period. There was a famous bumper sticker in the US, years ago, that said, Get the US out of the UN, and the UN out of the US. That kind of epitomised the

extreme right, which probably accounts for about 20 to 25% of the American public, including people who deeply, honestly believe (and I got letters about this) that Kofi Annan has a fleet of black helicopters at his disposal, and if they don't watch out, he will swoop in and seize Yellowstone National Park. A year ago I made a speech in George W. Bush's home area, Odessa, Texas. At the end of the speech someone got up and asked, Do you believe in World Government? And I said, No, I don't believe in World Government. Well why are you supporting that UN thing? he said. To which I replied, Well, you know, you might find not that the UN is too strong, but that it's too weak, I would like to see a stronger UN, but not as a World Government, it never was conceived that way, and it couldn't function that way.

So there are the people who love the UN, warts and all, and those that want to kill it. The key to the future of the UN, from an American point of view, is the middle group, who have to be mobilised to support the UN as a reformed institution. The Bush administration now says that John Bolton is a reformer of the UN. Maybe he is, but his track record would suggest that up until now he has been in that other group. The administration now says that reform is its goal, but in the last four years they have done nothing whatsoever to reform the UN. They have under-funded, under-supported, and undermined it. Even though they have had two good ambassadors, John Negroponte and Senator Jack Danforth, representing them in New York, they didn't support the institution, and that really hurt, because in the end, the UN is only as strong as its founding nation, its largest contributor, its host nation, wants it to be. The UN cannot succeed if it is in an open war with the United States, and furthermore, that puts our closest allies, and our closest ally is obviously Great Britain, in a difficult position. Whoever is occupying 10 Downing Street is going to want good relations with Washington, but for the last 50 years or more the British have stood consistently for a good, strong, effective UN. Other countries have wavered back and forth. Under De Gaulle, the French were anti-UN, and although now they claim to be great supporters, looking at their performance in Darfur, one would have to say it does not seem very likely. They have opposed strong action in Darfur, and today Darfur is the test.

So the UN future is very much on the line. And as far as Britain is concerned, the stronger their efforts to strengthen the UN, and to use its tremendous influence in Washington, to get them, including Congress, to strengthen the UN, the better. I assume most of you in this room would share my view that a stronger, more effective UN is in the national interests of both our countries, or you wouldn't be here, but there are people out there who may doubt that, and so it is very important to make clear to people why the UN, warts and all, is indispensable, and why the correct policy is not to destroy the UN in the name of reform, but to reform it in the name of a better, more effective United Nations. Thank you very much.