

Presentation: UN in Nairobi

WFUNA Event on the Responsibility to Protect

June 2011

Excellencies, my WFUNA colleagues, distinguished guests and UNA friends who, as I found out earlier today, are also quite distinguished:

I was a very young boy when Dag Hammarskjöld died. My first memory of him was not the plane crash but when my grandfather brought home postage stamps that the US government had printed to honor Mr. Hammarskjöld – the stamps weren't printed properly! There was white where there should have been yellow and brown! Grandfather was so excited!! I grew up thinking not about Hammarskjöld's UN service, but the fact that his mis-printed stamp was really cool and might even one day make our family rich.

Years later, I was blessed to have time with Sir Brian Urquhart, who served as USG for Special Political Affairs under Mr. Hammarskjöld, and who was one of the first people in the UN who understood that any responsibility by the international community to protect civilians, ensure treaties or otherwise keep the peace would require tools and capacities that the UN system did not have then and that many larger and smaller states, some 50 years later, are still reluctant to endorse.

Sir Brian's was very close to Hammarskjöld and his biography of him is a moving account of a highly important and impactful life that would easily have taken on epic proportions had it not been cut short by a plane crash. I learned from Sir Brian and others that Hammarskjöld's life was in most every respect as unique as his stamp.

In more recent years, Sir Brian has been a supporter of our proposal to create a UN Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS), not because he advocates for intervention, but because he understands that timing is everything in civilian protection – that the sooner we respond to threats of atrocity crimes -- mostly with diplomacy but occasionally with more robust means – the less likely that the violence will spiral out of hand.

Sir Brian, with Hammarskjöld's support, was one of the pioneers of what we have come to know as UN peacekeeping. But he often wondered aloud if it will always take 'major shocks' to get some movement on development of a new generation of tools to promote effective international security. He now recognizes – as we all do – that we have had those shocks, over and over again, and that even these crises have not fully persuaded the international community to act on complementary response capacities that can 'close the escape routes' for those seeking to avoid responsibility or accountability for the most severe of crimes.

Sir Brian's engagement with our project and RtoP in general has been instructive in many ways, specifically his insistence on robust prevention and early warning, as well as his concern – very much in keeping with Dag Hammarskjöld – that any change in the UN system, be it new policy or new implementation capacity, requires a heavy commitment to trustbuilding. This building of

trust is something that my office takes very seriously. Indeed, it may well be our only important work.

In doing that work, we have learned that, as there are 'three pillars' of RtoP, there are also three pillars of trustbuilding on norms such as RtoP and capacities such as UNEPS, all of which are essential to address if such proposals are to achieve more robust, consistent support from governments.

- Trust in the proposal and the viability of its technical capacities for effective, preventive response
- Trust in the people most strongly urging full adoption of the proposal and the degree to which they represent – and understand – the diverse needs of the global community
- Trust in the institution housing the proposal, and the issues of transparency and accountability that sometimes plague international institutions, especially the UN.

In our research and through regional consultations on UNEPS and RtoP, we have found that trust is actually higher for the proposals themselves than for the people behind them and the institution housing their interests. We cannot escape the fact that the faces behind a policy matter. The perceived fairness and transparency of the UN system and its Security Council matter. As controversial as 'third pillar' response tools can be, they are often seen by the global public as more trustworthy than the toolmakers themselves or than that institutional tool box known as the UN.

Trust in the UN was being built quite successfully by Hammarskjöld before his death but has been seriously compromised in the interim. What is missing in our system now? Again Sir Brian gives us a clue:

It was Hammarskjöld's rugged independence and ability to conduct behind-the-scenes quiet diplomacy, a technique which he all but invented, that made him so effective.

Hammarskjöld appeared to understand something that we too often forget: That objections to our norms and policies are not fatal, they are not personal, they have a context and a history behind them that we must take seriously. If we really want to build support for RtoP and 'third pillar' implementation tools, from prevention to reaction, we must listen more and talk less. We must understand more and judge less. We must do more of our work in private and less in the spotlight. We must risk more trust and take more chances. And we must do all of that together. One person can make change. But an intentional community can make sustainable change. We need that kind of change when it comes to atrocity crimes.

Genocide and crimes against humanity remain more than legal and political problems; they represent a blight on our human condition. This problem deserves as much of our skill, our passion, our creativity, our love as we can provide. We have what it takes to prevent and to address. Let's get busy.