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UN Reform Process Delayed Pending More Talks

By Andre de Nesnera
Washington
27 September 2005*de Nesnera report (Real Audio) - Download 711k* 
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Earlier this month, an unprecedented meeting bringing together 151 heads of state and government was held at the United Nations in New York. In this report from Washington. The aim of the meeting was to mark the United Nations' 60th anniversary and reaffirm the international community's commitment made in 2000 to fight poverty, eradicate hunger, combat HIV/AIDS and reduce child mortality - the so-called "UN Millennium Goals." In addition, the meeting was to agree on major reforms making the United Nations more suited to address the problems of the 21st century.



AP Photo

Final day of speeches at the United Nations summit

Analysts say the three-day meeting provided some positive elements, as well as disappointments and some unexpected developments.

One such development came when President George Bush endorsed the U. N.'s development plans.



AP Photo

George W. Bush

"We are committed to the Millennium Development Goals," he said. "This is an ambitious agenda that includes cutting poverty and hunger in half, ensuring that every boy and girl in the world has access to primary education and halting the spread of AIDS. We have a moral obligation to help others and a moral duty to make sure our actions are effective."

Many analysts say before this speech, the Bush administration was lukewarm in backing the U. N. goals. Experts also say this was Mr. Bush's most pro-United Nations speech of his presidency - this after naming John Bolton, a strong critic of the world body, as U.S. representative.

Some non-governmental organizations say they are disappointed that the United States and others continue to oppose a U.N. plan for industrialized nations to provide zero-point-seven percent of their Gross National Product -

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or GNP - to aid developing nations.

Michael Doyle is a former senior adviser to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who now teaches at Columbia University.

"The U.S. and other countries were against it for a number of reasons, but I think, most importantly, budgetary or financial - in the sense that 'money is money' and even though that is a small percent of U.S. national income, the will to make that kind of a commitment to development is not there," he said. "The second thing, is that in the U.S. in particular, there is a good deal of skepticism over the effectiveness of foreign aid as an engine of development."

The final document at the end of the U.N. summit did not commit industrialized nations to specific GNP quotas. It simply said the organization welcomes the fact that many developed nations are striving to achieve that 0.7 percent goal.

On another issue, the U.N. summit agreed to replace the discredited Commission on Human Rights with a Human Rights Council. Stewart Patrick, a U.N. expert with the Center for Global Development, says that is a positive step.

"It is absolutely essential to get rid of the Commission on Human Rights, which has allowed some of the worst abusers - Cuba, Libya and Sudan, and others - to actually have leadership positions, as well as membership, in a commission that is supposed to be protecting human dignity and advancing freedom," he said. "What the major abusers have discovered, is that they can make, exploit the bloc voting that occurs in the United Nations General Assembly to actually get themselves elected to this, and that this is one of the best ways to blunt international oversight over what they are actually doing to their citizens."

However, many experts say it is still unclear what countries will be part of this new Human Rights Council.

Nancy Soderberg, former alternate U.S. representative to the United Nations (1997-2001), says a proposal to have a select group of some 30 nations elected by a two-thirds majority of the General Assembly has been watered down. She says the final document simply called on the president of the General Assembly to conduct and complete negotiations as soon as possible.

"A lot of countries are not yet ready to buy on to [to accept] a strong human rights component because they are afraid the international community will end up turning the spotlight back on them and they are not ready for that," she said.

Analysts say one of the glaring failures of the U.N. summit was its inability to agree on reforming the Security Council.



AP Photo

Ms. Soderberg says the Security Council must reflect today's world, and the powers of 2005 are not necessarily those of 1945, when the United Nations was created.

"So you have the five permanent members - China, Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom and France - but you don't have anyone from Latin America, Africa - only China," she said.

Members of the Security Council meet at United Nations headquarters

"You don't have enough representation of the world as it stands today. So it's not reflective of the world, therefore it lacks legitimacy in the eyes of some

people who feel that it's not a balanced reflection of the world community."

Summit participants did not approve a plan proposed by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan to expand the Security Council from 15 to 24 members. The final document simply said the member states support early reform.

Former U.N. official Michael Doyle questions the validity of expanding Security Council membership.

"There is no one who thinks that a larger committee is, ipso facto [by definition], a better committee," he said. "And so expanding it from 15 to 24, it could make it that much more difficult to get together the votes that one needs to take decisions. And one of the great problems of the Security Council in its modern history, is that it sat on its hands while emergencies took place around it. It was so slow to become effective in the Balkans and it was horribly slow in Rwanda to take action. The idea that you would have to spend more time rounding up more votes is problematic."

From membership on a new human rights body to an enlarged Security Council - those reforms, and others, have essentially been delayed pending further negotiations. Experts say it is critical for the United Nations to initiate changes in order to continue to be an effective force on the international stage in the years to come.



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