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Dear Letters Editor,

Nick Cohen's article about the UN (*How the UN lets genocidal states get away with murder*) is a perfect example of shooting the pianist in order to get a change in the music. No one doubts that the UN needs strengthening and reforming; and no one defends the UN's failures in Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda and, so far, in Darfur. But the cause of reform will not be advanced by flailingly inaccurate attacks or by attempting to pin the blame for serious collective failures on one individual or another.

The universality of the UN's membership is surely one of its strengths when you compare it to the League of Nations; but it can suspend members from the General Assembly, and it did effectively suspend Slobodan Milošević's Serbia because of its aggression against Bosnia (as it did also in the case of South Africa).

Rupert Smith was a UN general, not a British one, when he called in air strikes to lift the siege of Sarajevo in 1995. Moreover, Kofi Annan, at that time in charge of UN peacekeeping, was praised by the United States for allowing the strikes to proceed.

Paul Volcker's encyclopaedic enquiry into the 'Oil-for-Food' scandal did not reveal "lavish corruption" in the UN Secretariat; it revealed evidence that two officials may have broken the law and one other acted improperly.

In Darfur, the absolute priority now must surely be to step up the pressure on the government of Sudan to admit a UN peacekeeping force as mandated by the Security Council. And, more generally, to strengthen the hand of the new Secretary-General to continue the reforms begun by his predecessor. That, I am glad to say, was the view taken by a packed meeting of the Cambridge Union last week when it voted by 361 to 33 to reject the motion asserting that the UN was a dead loss.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick
Chair,
UN Association of the UK

Sir Jeremy Greenstock
UK Permanent Representative to the UN,
1998 – 2003