

Lord Hannay of Chiswick, Chair, UNA-UK
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It is some 15 months now since I last reported to our conference. As I have done on previous occasions I will first talk about our own activities and then look a little more widely at the state of the UN itself and at what we should be encouraging it to do in the period ahead.

I would suggest that, without undue self-congratulation or complacency, we can look on the period since our last conference in Exeter in March 2008 as one of real achievement. The campaign to ban cluster munitions was crowned with success, at least in so far as the British government's position was concerned, and that shift in position had important positive knock-on effects worldwide. We have held three well-attended and well-organised conferences on climate change – in Birmingham, in Belfast and, most recently, in London at the event hosted by UNA London & South-East Region at the IMO premises. We have successfully pressed the government to take action against the spread of piracy in the Horn of Africa. We have lobbied with some effect for the early ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities with the smallest possible number of reservations, and the UK ratification will be completed next Monday. We spoke up during the hostilities in Gaza, criticising the disproportionate nature of the Israeli military action and emphasising the need for an independent inquiry into the allegation of human rights abuses and into the use of white phosphorous as well as protesting against the BBC's decision not to broadcast the humanitarian appeal. We worked hard for the revival of negotiations for multilateral nuclear disarmament, most recently at UNA Edinburgh's conference in April of this year, and have seen our efforts receive a major boost in President Obama's Prague speech and in Gordon Brown's contribution to the International Nuclear Fuel Cycle Conference in London in March. All this and more is set out in much greater detail than I have time to devote to it here in the really excellent UNA-UK Impact Report, which I hope you have all received and have had time to study. That report should be a mine of useful and useable material for all our work, as well as reflecting the high presentational qualities of Sam Daws and his team.

None of this would of course have been possible without the tireless efforts of our very small secretariat in Whitehall Court. Sam Daws and his team have made the miracle of the loaves and fishes look simple. Financial constraints have in fact marginally reduced the size of that staff, but not their skill and output. This is the first time for a number of years that we are meeting without Veronica Lie, who has moved to a new job in Norway. She leaves behind not only many friends in UNA who owe her a debt of gratitude for all her hard work, but also a rejuvenated 'New World' which will now pass into the able hands of Natalie Samarasinghe. But one of the most encouraging developments of the last year has been the way individual branches, regions and nations have mounted successful major events. In the last three months alone we have had the nuclear non-proliferation conference in Edinburgh organised by Gari Donn and UNA Edinburgh; the climate change conference in London organised by Neville Grant and UNA London & South-East Region and the annual conference to mark the international day of the UN

peacekeepers – that now irreplaceable event organised by David Wardrop and UNA Westminster branch. These events underline the strength of our membership base, and I hope others will be inspired to follow their example.

Last year I sounded a note of warning about our finances. While the current situation is manageable, it remains precarious and fragile, with still only a modest portion of our needs covered by membership subscriptions. We have been helped recently by two extremely generous legacies. And our future finances have been strengthened by a further substantial grant from the Joseph Rowntree Trust for work on nuclear disarmament. We are now well advanced in the preparatory work needed if UNA-UK is to become a charity and are quite likely to ask you take a decision on that in advance of our next formal meeting.

Let us now look more widely at the UN system and how it is faring in this difficult period which I characterised, I think without too much hyperbole, as 'new world disorder'. As so often with the UN, the picture is a mixed and patchy one. The effort the Secretary-General and his senior officials are putting into the negotiations leading up to December's crucial climate change conference in Copenhagen is exemplary, even if we cannot yet be sure that it will be rewarded with success. The handling, by the World Health Organization, of the worldwide implications of a possible flu pandemic, which originated in Mexico, is a reminder of why the use of the word indispensable is well earned. A multinational naval force, acting under the UN Security Council's authority and containing vessels from Europe, the US, China, Russia, India and Malaysia, is gradually beginning to deter and to combat a serious outbreak of piracy, a scourge we all believed had been left behind in the 19th century and which was threatening world trade generally and most specifically the delivery of emergency food supplies to Somalia. The UN has played an important role in mitigating the effects of last year's cyclone in the Irrawaddy Delta despite the churlish resistance of the Burmese regime. The crisis situation in the Congo has temporarily abated. But Darfur remains a running sore, no nearer to solution than it ever was, and with humanitarian relief crippled by the regime in Khartoum's unjustified reaction to the indictment of President Bashir by the International Criminal Court. In Sri Lanka, efforts to establish an enquiry into the conduct of both the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan military during the recent intense hostilities have failed and humanitarian access to civilians remains grossly inadequate. And last August in the brief conflagration in Georgia we saw yet again how powerless the UN is to act when one of the permanent members of the Security Council is directly involved. This is a record of which the UN cannot be proud, but of which it need not be ashamed.

The world is, I believe, at one of these watershed moments which occur every 20 or 30 years. The immediate post-Cold War period is over and so is that brief moment of US hubris and unilateralism when President George W. Bush's administration believed, wrongly as it turned out, that it could manage every problem by the strength of its own right arm. With President Obama we now have a US administration which is aiming to work more closely with its allies, which is prepared to talk to its adversaries without preconditions, which regards multilateral action as desirable and not as an optional extra, and which has proclaimed as its objective a nuclear-weapons-free world.

But watersheds can lead down into dark and treacherous valleys, just as easily as they can into sunlit, pleasing ones. The risks the world faces from the current financial and economic turmoil are real, and they could threaten many of the objectives which underpin the whole UN system. The resources needed for the Millennium Development Goals could fall shorter than they were already doing before the crisis started; the prospect of freer and fairer world trade contained in the Doha development round of negotiations could be replaced by protectionism and contraction; the desire to check global warming could falter, deprived of resources and political will; the opportunities presented by the Obama administration could evoke an inadequate response elsewhere and dissipate like a mirage. So there is much to play for in the years ahead; and the UN needs to be at the centre of the action if it is not to be marginalised as it was so often during the Cold War.

What should the UN's priorities be? First a word about policy objectives and then some thoughts on institutional change. It is obvious that the Copenhagen climate change conference has to be at the heart of the UN's efforts throughout 2009. A fine balance will need to be struck between developed and developing countries, with the former bearing more of the financial burden, but not all of it, and providing effective technology transfer on the basis of strongly stepped-up research efforts in such fields as carbon capture and storage. Then, secondly, UN peacekeeping is more stretched than ever before, but every bit as necessary. Regional peacekeeping efforts need to be backed up by the UN as a whole, as the Prodi report has recommended; and more progress is needed on one of the most long-standing weaknesses of UN peacekeeping – the lack of a rapid response capability. Thirdly, the UN needs to resume its efforts to make a living reality out of the 'responsibility to protect', building on the Secretary-General's recent report and the excellent work of his special adviser, Professor Ed Luck. It is important to move away from an approach which focuses almost exclusively on what can only be an absolutely last resort – external military intervention – and onto an approach which makes more use of the whole contents of the UN's toolbox: diplomatic, economic and human rights to help countries avoid slipping towards state failure. What the UN cannot afford to do is simply give up on the responsibility to protect and consign it to the 'too difficult' tray. And then, fourthly there is perhaps the biggest challenge of all, the revival of multilateral negotiations on nuclear disarmament and on measures to strengthen the non-proliferation regime, which will come to a head at next year's Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference, but which will need to reach far beyond – that is, if they are to bear fruit.

Quite an agenda you may think, and that is even without such essential items such as the revival of a serious and inclusive Middle East peace process; the diversion of North Korea and Iran's nuclear programmes into verifiably exclusively civil forms of activity; the consolidation of democratically elected governments in both Afghanistan and Pakistan against threats from terrorists and insurgents; and the successful completion of the US withdrawal from combat operations in Iraq.

Now for the other side of the coin: institutional change, firstly an effort is already under way in the General Assembly to harpoon that great white whale of international diplomacy, Security Council enlargement. Another attempt to reach early agreement on new permanent members, with or without the veto, looks no

more likely to succeed than the last two failed attempts in 1997 and 2005. So let us hope that attention is rather focused on the second and I believe achievable formula put forward by the UN High-level Panel on Threats Challenges and Change in 2004: the creation of a new category of longer-term re-electable members which could over time lead on to more ambitious reform. Then, secondly, now that the European and American stronghold on the offices of the Director-General of the IMF and the President of the World Bank has been broken, is it not high time to relax the regional pre-emption on the office of the UN Secretary-General? Of course one cannot, and should not, aim to do away with any regional rotation of that office. But rotation could be achieved without, as is now the case, excluding at the outset every candidate from any region other than that whose turn it is considered to be. Thirdly, there certainly needs to be a major institutional development of UN activities in the fields of the environment and energy as part of the Copenhagen package, if one can be agreed. The present UN Environment Programme does good work, but it has neither the mandate nor the resources to implement and to oversee an ambitious set of legal obligations and financial commitments. That will require at least a full-scale agency of the sort we have to handle health or refugees; and its scope should be extended to cover energy issues which currently fall between every stool at the UN. And, fourthly, we must not be blind to the weaknesses of the, as yet fledgling, Human Rights Council. It has not yet proved able to break out of the pattern of diplomatic manoeuvring and grandstanding and really get to grips with the many abuses of human rights in all four corners of the world. Most recently over Sri Lanka, it has, quite frankly, disgraced itself. In 2011 the Council's work and terms of reference will be reviewed. Organisations like ours need soon to begin a dialogue with the government about how best to remedy those initial weaknesses and about what reforms we should be seeking.

As you can see, neither the UN nor UNA-UK is going to run out of challenges or tasks any time soon. Whether we make progress towards achieving them will depend crucially on the efforts of our memberships – both the member states of the UN, and the member of UNA-UK.