

## **UN can still be powerful force for solutions**

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In 1945 I was old enough to be interested and hopeful concerning the newly formed United Nations Organization. I optimistically thought it would bring the nations of the world together in peace. I believed then that achieving the objectives of the United Nations would require the co-operation of the 51 original member countries. Their pursuit of justice would surely involve the best possible policies for world peace. It was a grand ethical vision that stood in contrast to the aggression and suffering of World War II in which Canadians had fought so bravely.

Today, the UN membership has grown to 192 countries, with over 120,000 UN personnel working as peace keepers. Many are military, the rest are observers who oversee housing, food distribution, education, and health. Voting and election procedures in newly developing democracies are also part of peace keeping.

In its broadest sense, peace keeping includes tasks that go beyond military engagements. These involve investigation of human rights violations, social and economic development, building and restoring infrastructure (roads, electricity, water, sewage, hospitals, schools and food distribution). Other UN workers monitor legal matters, including boundary disputes, policing, justice, investigation of torture, international law, disarmament, territorial jurisdiction and land mine violations. These tasks, supplementary to peace-keeping, take on ethical dimensions. They involve caring, justice and compassion for fellow human beings in various ethnic groups, religions and geographic locations throughout the world.

Much UN work occurs in underdeveloped, third-world countries, but this is not always the case. In Canada, the United Nations has investigated and reported on treaties and Native rights of First Nations people, and on their housing conditions, educational services, and Native fishing and hunting rights. The United Nations has also determined that, in Ontario, there are inequitable systems of education, providing public funding for Roman Catholic schools, but minimal or no public funding for other religious schools. Part of this situation results from historical

conditions at the time of Canada's confederation, when section 93 of the British North America Act of 1867 gave a measure of protection to Roman Catholic Schools already in existence at that time.

In the USA, the United Nations has investigated allegations of American terrorism, torture, illegal voting procedures, and land mines violations. Usually, though not always, these investigations occurred as a result of USA actions in countries outside their own borders.

Obviously, United Nations is a complex organization, involved in many facets of world peace and in the general betterment of humankind. When countries co-operate, important peace-keeping work can be accomplished. When they do not co-operate, the public may decide the UN is ineffective. Many countries quickly turn to other solutions, including military alliances, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), The South East Asia Treaty Organization and other military alliances in other parts of the world, including George W. Bush's, "Coalition of the Willing". While it may be necessary to resort to military actions from time to time, the first choice, of even the most powerful countries, should be to seek peaceful means of settling disputes. According to United Nations records, the costs of peace represent less than one percent of the total costs of carrying on a war.

It is true that the UN has had its failures in resolving disputes in Syria and in the ongoing conflicts between Palestine and Israel. It has also had its failures in the Congo, Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia, Herzegovina and many other countries where atrocities have been committed and many human lives have been lost. But these failures are not the result of a lack of effort on the part of the UN. In most cases, where the UN is ineffective, it is because either one or more disagreeing parties fail to co-operate in using the help that the United Nations has set up and is ready to provide. Too often, the UN has been the last resort rather than the first source, in solving problems. When member countries cooperate, the United Nations can still be a powerful force for ethical and practical solutions. In fact, the United Nations may be the best and perhaps in many cases, the only answer, for world peace and co-operation.