# Bad Faith Actor

Claudia Rosett

In the pantheon of United Nations causes, Africa by many measures occupies a preeminent role. Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon has described "the African challenge" as "the highest priority on my agenda."[1] Africa is the main theater of UN peacekeeping operations, the poster-continent for UN aid appeals, the object of a long series of high-minded promises and home to a huge roster of lavishly funded UN programs, projects, offices, commissions and initiatives.

Nor does the interest run only one way. At the UN itself, African nations field a considerable presence and substantial voice. The previous two Secretaries-General, Kofi Annan and Boutros Boutros-Ghali, both hailed from African nations—respectively, Ghana and Egypt. African countries hold more than one-quarter of the 192 member seats in the UN's chief governing body, the General Assembly. When they band together, this gives them a regional voting bloc rivaled only by the Organization of the Islamic Conference—in which African nations in any event hold more than one-third of the seats.

True, Africa does not hold any of the five veto-wielding seats on the Security Council. But it has enough member states rotating through the ten non-permanent seats that the U.S., in seeking support for ousting Saddam Hussein in early 2003, ended up pleading for help from the governments of Guinea and Cameroon—then members of the Security Council. During the August 2006 Security Council deliberations over the war launched by Lebanon's Hezbollah

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militia against Israel, it was Ghana which that month held the chair.

But if all this intertwining of interests and influence sounds like the makings of a fortuitous UN-African partnership, think again—especially if the aim is peace and prosperity on the African continent.

There are plenty of reasons to question just how benevolent a force the UN really is in Africa, and how much trust we should place in its campaigns for peace and prosperity.

Many of us have been brought up, Halloween UNICEF can in hand, to regard the UN as a benevolent institution; unwieldy and bureaucratic, perhaps, but essentially loveable and devoted to the betterment of humanity. In the July 2007 issue of *Vanity Fair*, we find the iconic image of this approach: the guru of UN development strategy, economist and UN Special Adviser Jeffrey Sachs, sitting cross-legged under a tree, meeting with African village elders while on tour with a reporter to whom he is explaining that poverty in Africa could be wiped out if only the wealthy countries of the world would open their wallets much wider—say, $200 billion worth or so.

There are plenty of reasons, however, to question just how benevolent a force the UN really is, and how much trust we should place in its campaigns for peace and prosperity. Prime among the problems are the UN's long-standing penchant for dignifying dictators, as well as its current pursuit under various new labels—such as "Millennium Development Goals" and "national capacity-building"—of the old, ruinous formula of economic central planning.

Recent years have brought with them a host of scandals highlighting ways in which the UN harms some of the very people it purports to be helping. The UN Oil-for-Food relief program for the people of Saddam Hussein's Iraq turned out to be a global bacchanal of graft which, despite the UN's own sanctions, helped enrich and support the regime of one of the world's worst dictators. The long-standing UN policy of treating the Palestinians as a unique class of refugees, entitled for more than half a century now to an apparently unending flow of UN-channeled benefits, has helped foster an entitlement culture of permanently aggrieved UN clients—a disservice not least to the Palestinians themselves.

Out of Africa in recent years have come yet more glaring symbols of such UN perversions of what are supposed to be good works. For example, it has turned out that UN peacekeepers in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Liberia, and Sierra Leone have been sexually exploiting some of the very people they are supposed to be protecting—including, in some cases, children.

On the broader human rights front, we have seen the "election" by the African regional bloc of Libya, one of the world's worst human rights violators, to serve in 2003 as chair of the UN Human Rights Council. Framed by UN officials as an exercise in African solidarity, this was a handy development for African dictators seeking to dampen criticism from the UN, not least Libya's Muammar Qadhafi himself. But for Africa's real champions of human rights, it was a disaster. As a young black member of Zimbabwe's embattled political oppo-

sition described it to this reporter at the time, it was "totally outrageous and revolting."[2]

The outrages do not stop. This year, Zimbabwe was chosen at the UN to chair the Commission on Sustainable Development. This raises alarming questions about what, precisely, the UN is hoping to develop. Under Robert Mugabe's long and ruinous rule, Zimbabwe has been reduced from the breadbasket of southern Africa to a basket case. With policies borrowed from China's cultural revolution, Mr. Mugabe and his circle of cronies have beggared much of the country's population, destroying homes and farms in order to sustain a regime that for many offers no hope of sharing in the kind of growing prosperity enjoyed by, say, neighboring democratic Botswana.

## Cash cow

All this goes some distance toward suggesting that for the UN to focus on Africa as its chief challenge and prime beneficiary is no favor to most Africans. Nor is it a glowing prospect for the rest of us, if we are guided by the principle that the achievement of peace and prosperity on the African continent is important to the welfare and security of the free world.

To be sure, the UN has had some successes, in much the same way that even the mafia, in running its protection rackets, does deliver some services. Even Oil-for-Food, while ballooning into the biggest financial scam in history and a pillar of support for Saddam, did deliver rations in Iraq. The UN system, with its $20 billion annual budget, pours billions every year into its endeavors to help Africa, on top of, or in combination with, yet more billions doled out in the form of cheap loans, debt forgiveness, and so forth by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Within the UN system, one can find decent people, trying to do the right thing. Yes, there are cases in which the medicine arrives, the anti-malarial bed-nets help, and the parasitic Guinea Worm is cut out of the water supply.

But these achievements come in the context of broader UN activities that routinely undermine the real promise of the continent—supporting and dignifying some of the worst governments, while imposing elaborate, bureaucratically designed and managed schemes that too often range from peculiar to just plain ruinous. One of the best in-depth explanations of this problem comes from economist William Easterly, currently a New York University professor, this year on leave at the Brookings Institution. Mr. Easterly was railroaded out of a long-term job at the World Bank in 2001 after questioning publicly why decades of development aid have been on balance a colossal failure. In his most recent book, *The White Man's Burden*, Mr. Easterly, in deploring the patronizing attitude of development-aid planners, notes that the real successes come not from state (or UN) planners, but when people are allowed enough freedom to help themselves: "While Western planners were discussing whether to increase foreign aid by $50 billion for all poor countries, the citizens of just two large poor countries—India and China—were generating an increase in income for themselves of $175 billion every year."[3] An expert, in particular, on Africa, Mr. Easterly in an illuminating chapter title reminds us: "The Rich Have Markets, the Poor Have Bureaucrats."

The UN gives lip service to the vital role of markets, but both its poli-

cies and practices are mostly about reinforcing state bureaucracies, or even adding yet more layers of bureaucrats. The structure of the UN is such that whatever the real effects of these layers on the intended beneficiaries, the UN itself does very well out of the deal. More programs, projects and grand initiatives translate into justification for demanding more funding from member states and soliciting more support from private donors. In the UN's vast web of interlocking programs, UN agencies quietly charge percentage fees, usually ranging from one to seven percent, for handling funds on each other's behalf. And the UN itself has become an ever-expanding empire, a multilateral labyrinth, operating across borders, with little accountability and almost none of the transparency necessary to keep government institutions at least somewhat honest. Through this opaque UN maze flows a river of tax-exempt UN salaries, fat per diems, handsome perquisites and patronage opportunities for UN officials, families and friends.

All too often, UN activities undermine the real promise of the continent—supporting and dignifying some of the worst governments, while imposing elaborate, bureaucratically designed and managed schemes that routinely range from peculiar to just plain ruinous.

For instance, in the year 2000, the executive secretary of the UN's Economic Commission for Africa reported that "40 percent of the UN assistance currently goes to Africa."[4] But when asked for a more recent round number, a spokesman for the Secretary-General's office e-mailed back to a reporter "the very concept of 'aid' to Africa may be rather hard to define in the case of the UN." He suggested checking with various agencies "starting with UNDP, WFP, UNIDO, ECOSOC, the Peacebuilding Commission, etc." A query this July to the office of the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Africa, set up by former Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2003 to help coordinate and keep track of UN operations in Africa, was met by the contact person for that office, David Wright, with the point-blank statement that he did not approve of articles written by this reporter about Mr. Annan and therefore would not provide any information at all.

In this setting, it becomes ever more complicated to track the real interests being served. It is probably no accident that the rash of bribery cases in the UN headquarters procurement division, which have resulted in three convictions over the past two years in New York federal court, all involved kickbacks for UN contracts to supply peacekeeping missions in Africa. That's where a big slice of the money is.

## Smoke and mirrors

On the geopolitical level, the UN setup which treats all sovereign governments as equal—regardless of whether they are democratic or despotic—lends itself to exploitation by the least scrupulous. In finding a way to stop the genocide going on for years in Sudan's Darfur region, for example, it does not help that unfree China, while deep in oil deals with the Sudanese government, holds one of the five veto-wielding permanent seats on the Security Council.

In this UN universe of moral equivalency, strange priorities bubble up. A

classic example would be the bizarre op-ed on Darfur penned by Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon which appeared recently in the *Washington Post*.[5] In his article, Mr. Ban described genocide in Darfur chiefly as a product of that increasingly fashionable UN cause: climate change. Mr. Ban argued that the genocide was at root the result of drought, which he believes is caused by global warming. Whatever one's view of global warming—and there is plenty in the UN view to argue with—Mr. Ban's call for "teaming with the Sudanese government" skips right past the most basic problem: the glaring reality that Sudan is run by an Islamist dictatorship which has been abetting the genocide.

For all we know, Mr. Ban may have been moved to write his Darfur op-ed by nothing more sinister than an absurdly skewed view of the real priorities and interests at work in Sudan. But some of the UN undercurrents in which he swims are at least worth noting. At the UN, arrangements under the Kyoto Treaty to address the perceived problem of global warming have been tilted financially in favor of China. As a developing country, with special ties to Kyoto Treaty architect and long-time UN eminence Maurice Strong, China enjoys special breaks on the environmental front, despite being one of the world's worst polluters. And China, as noted above, is also one of the top international players doing big oil business with the government of Sudan, and has used its veto-wielding seat on the UN Security Council to resist any genuine solution to the genocide in Darfur. Whether Mr. Ban thought of it or not, a UN approach to Sudan that focuses on climate change for the planet, rather than on regime change in Khartoum, seems likely to suit Beijing just fine.

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More broadly, but in the same spirit of "teaming" with governments, regardless as a rule of whether they are good or bad, the UN brings to its endeavors in Africa a central-planning model of development. In theory, this approach landed almost 20 years ago on history's junk heap with the collapse of the Soviet Union. But this is a mode toward which the UN—an institution made up of governments—naturally gravitates. It is a method of control which the UN in one form or another has been trying for some time to reprise, in the name of efficient good works. The biggest UN venture of this kind in the post-Soviet era was Oil-for-Food, in which the UN set out to supervise state rationing as the main mechanism for supplying everything from vehicles to sugar to soap.

In Africa, UN central planning comes in two interwoven guises. One is the UN's grand plan for "Millennium Development Goals," or MDGs—launched by Kofi Annan at the turn of the millennium, and peddled by Mr. Sachs and other UN top officials. The idea is that every developing country on the planet will, in collaboration with UN planners, set out a list of numerically measured targets with a specific timetable for such missions as halving poverty, reducing disease, increasing gender equality, and so forth, by the year 2015. The UN will then assist with resources and experts in monitor-

ing and achieving these goals. If that sounds laudable, the problem is that real development tends to proceed not by way of elaborate bureaucratic plans, but by way of setting out rules that allow people the freedom to decide for themselves what their priorities are, and what trade-offs they prefer to make in terms of timetables and goals.

The result is a sprawling, murky empire of UN plans and special interests, in which the boundaries of "aid" are almost impossible to define, and the goals are set by a UN bureaucracy that has its own tendencies to expand its turf and protect its interests, both financial and political.

Predictably, the UN's giant MDG enterprise is already failing, especially in Africa—though not for lack of interest by client governments. In April 2007, the UN Development Program reported that 40 of the 45 countries covered by its Regional Bureau for Africa had "embarked on MDG-based planning, with support from UNDP and in close collaboration with other UN agencies," and about 20 of these "have now put in place credible MDG-based plans."[6] But in a report issued just two months later, the UN reported that "[n]ot a single country in sub-Saharan Africa was on track."[7] The UN prescription? Calls from top UN officials to double the available funding. In other words, if it's not working, do more of it.

Last year, the original office handling the MDGs, known as the UN Millennium Project, was folded directly into the offices of the UN's flagship agency, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which already had its own pernicious approach. The UNDP specializes in allying itself directly with national governments, usually at high levels, and collaborating in the design of specific development projects to which the UNDP then channels resources. In other words, the same governments whose misrule is the source of many of Africa's problems become the direct partners of the UNDP in designing plans meant to fix those problems.

For the press or general public, finding out what is really going on is nearly impossible. Details given are usually vague, and the budgets are almost never disclosed—and certainly not in any form that shows, say, actual nitty-gritty expenditure, as opposed to round sums for projected funding needs. The UNDP does not allow even its own 36-member governing body, the executive board, to see its internal audit reports.

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## Inside job

The case of Kojo Annan, son of former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and his green Mercedes is emblematic of this misrule. The story might never have emerged had not President Bush, against the wishes of Annan senior and the UN, invaded Iraq and toppled Saddam. That brought to light documents which broke wide open the Oil-for-Food scandal. That, in turn, led to Paul Volcker's UN-authorized inquiry into Oil-for-Food. And in

the course of looking at UN-related business dealings of Kofi Annan's son, Kojo, Mr. Volcker came across the money trail of a Mercedes SUV, which Kojo Annan had bought in Europe at a diplomatic discount and shipped duty-free into Ghana in 1998, falsely using his father's name and UN diplomatic status.

In the UN system, the UNDP country representatives often double as representatives of the Secretary-General. So, as described in Mr. Volcker's September 7, 2005, final report, it was the UNDP's representative in Ghana who handled the paperwork to bring the Mercedes into the country, duty-free, under the UNDP seal—at a savings to Kojo Annan of more than $14,000, many times the annual income of Ghana's most impoverished citizens who are in theory the reason the UNDP is in Ghana at all. The rep, Abdoulie Janneh, was promoted the following year to a job at UNDP headquarters in New York, where he ended up running the UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa. When interviewed in 2005 by the Volcker committee, Mr. Janneh gave a statement implying that he never got in touch with Kofi Annan either to confirm or to report the details surrounding the Mercedes which had arrived in the Secretary-General's name. This helped clear Kofi Annan of any knowledge of misconduct.

As with most things UN-related, one hand washes the other. Less than two weeks after the Volcker report came out, Mr. Annan promoted Abdoulie Janneh to serve as the executive secretary of the UN's Economic Commission for Africa, based in Addis Ababa, with a $65 million annual budget. The Mercedes itself was reported by Kojo Annan's lawyer to have been wrecked in an accident in Nigeria in late 2005, shortly after the Volcker report called attention to its curious history. In early 2006, more than seven years after the car arrived in Africa under false UN status, Kojo Annan finally offered to reimburse the government of Ghana for the unpaid customs duties—but paid no penalty. As of this writing, there has been no independent confirmation of the final fate of the car. But, writ small, the tale of that Mercedes speaks volumes about what the UN is really all about in Africa, and who benefits.

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3. William Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 26-27, and chapter heading cited is on page 165.
4. K. Y. Amoako, "Claiming the 21st Century: Africa's Agenda," Remarks before The National Summit on Africa, Washington, DC, February 17, 2000, http://www.uneca.org/eca_resources/speeches/amoako/2000/021700_ky_amoako_africa_aummit1.htm.
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