

"Civil Society and the Security Council"

Remarks to the NGO Working Group on the Security Council

***Amb. Juan Somavía (Permanent Representative of Chile to the UN and
Current President of the security Council)***

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I am very happy that while I am serving as Council President I can speak to you about "Civil Society and the Security Council." Right off the bat, though, I would like to say that I'm not speaking as President of the Security Council or as the Ambassador of Chile. I am speaking as Juan Somavía -- to express some of my personal views of these issues and to consider the things that might be done to bring civil society and the Security Council closer together.

As you know -- and as Jim Paul has kindly reflected in his introduction -- this is an issue that I care very much about: the need for the U.N. to be open to the world, to be open to society and to peoples' organizations. And the need for it to get away from governments meeting only with governments and discussing the affairs of the world without a relationship to civil society.

I think the U.N. does its best through the conference process. I find it incredible that, in an effort to make the U.N. more efficient -- which is necessary -- some people think



that we must eliminate the conferences. On the country, conferences are the most creative, the most knowledgeable, and the most consensus-building process of the United Nations. And conferences are the place where civil society has its greatest impact. So it is very dubious when countries propose to put an end to the conference process, when these same countries ardently promote civil society organizations. I find this a very big contradiction and I've been outspoken in opposing it. If you really want to cut costs and you take a careful look at the costs of the world conferences, you see that they are peanuts compared to even the most minor peacekeeping operation. So it's pure nonsense to be talking about eliminating the conference process.

When organizing the Social Summit, I was often asked about the purpose of conferences. People asked: Are they useful? Don't you just sign documents and, afterwards, nothing happens? Etcetera. -- Well, it's true, as we know from the meetings of the Commission on Sustainable Development, not everything that was agreed upon in Rio is now being implemented. But a lot of the hopes that were defined in '72, in Stockholm, have become a reality in the consciousness of people. That is what conferences are about. They are about beliefs, about changing consciousness. And then, changing policy.

Consequently, thinking about the Security Council in relation to civil society is very much part of my own preoccupations. In institutional terms, the question of a new role for civil society is now being discussed at the U.N. in a Working Group of the General Assembly. The whole expansion of civil society presence beyond ECOSOC is being discussed in this Working Group. There has been an intense debate about opening up the work of the General Assembly and the Security Council. Of course, again, it is strange to see those who promote civil society organizations in the economic and social sectors become immediately alarmed when we say: well, what about doing the same thing on the political side of the U.N.?

So there is confusion in terms of who is really for what, and for what they really are for. I believe civil society should be everywhere -- in the economic and social field and in the General Assembly. And now I want to talk about the Security Council.

The Security Council and the Role of Humanitarian Organizations

I want to make two comments. One is about the role of humanitarian organizations in every one of the conflicts that the Security Council addresses. This role is practically invisible. Press reports do not reflect it. It is not politically acknowledged. And yet, in every one of these conflicts, the role of humanitarian organizations is absolutely vital.



People ask what the Security Council decided. But there is not a single media report that says that the Council highlighted the role of the humanitarian organizations in this conflict. The press looks only at the politics, the geopolitics, the alliances, the factions, the groups, the leaders, etcetera. That's what is considered "news." But, in fact, the humanitarian organizations are there. And they are doing an incredible job. Part of the humanitarian work is carried out by organizations that belong to the UN system – the High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Program, UNICEF, and the Department of Humanitarian Affairs. But the non-governmental organizations are essential. The Red Cross, for example, and Oxfam, Medecins Sans Frontieres, and Care -- to name only organizations mentioned as important in the Secretary-General's reports.

In terms of the Council's direct concerns, Somalia is the place where humanitarian organizations are playing the most important role. There is no government there, and practically no UN either, because the UN has had to shift its presence from Mogadishu to Nairobi. Without the humanitarian organizations, the situation would have reverted to the very critical condition we saw earlier, where some 3,000 people were dying daily.

To its credit, the Security Council has acknowledged this, at least in writing. Many times in the past four months, when I was sitting in the Council, the issue has come up. I want to quote to you the clearest evidence of this -- a passage from a statement given by the president of the Security Council on January 24, 1996: "The Council condemns the harassment, beatings, abduction and killings of the personnel of international humanitarian organizations and underlines the responsibility of all parties in Somalia for ensuring the safety and security of all humanitarian and other international personnel. This atmosphere of insecurity has regrettably forced the UN agencies to relocate international personnel, thus hindering the delivery of the much needed humanitarian assistance. The Security Council commends the valiant efforts of the UN and international humanitarian agencies and the Somali personnel for their courage and determination to render assistance to the people of Somalia. The Security Council encourages member states to continue to provide humanitarian assistance in order to avoid the further deterioration of the current situation. The Security Council considers the uninterrupted delivery of humanitarian assistance to be a crucial factor in the overall security and stability of Somalia." Now, this is quite an extraordinary statement. It is a recognition by the Security Council that those who are keeping overall stability and security in Somalia are the humanitarian organizations.

The Security Council, in its declarations referring to humanitarian organizations, states its concern about: (1) security for the personnel, (2) freedom of movement, and (3) protection of operations, whether food convoys or places where deliveries take place -- in other words, security for the operation, as well as the people. These are the three



basic things that the Security Council generally repeats when it refers to humanitarian organizations.

Relations between the Council and Civil Society

Coming back to the overall issue, the Security Council and civil society, I think that effective contact is there on the ground, in the field. The problem is at the level of the political decision making. The linkage is not there. There isn't much dialogue, except for the Red Cross, which has a habit of visiting the Security Council president at the beginning of his/her tenure and informing him/her of how the Red Cross views the conflicts before the Security Council that month. We need closer contact between humanitarian organizations and the Council, and much more information for Council members. Because, finally, the only thing we have on the table from these organizations is what we receive through reports of the Secretary General. It would be extremely useful to receive reports directly and more often from the organizations themselves. I would advocate closer contact, particularly to learn more of their opinions about these conflicts, because they have such a valuable perspective.

At the same time, we must ensure the autonomy and independence of these civil society organizations. We wouldn't want closer linkage with the Security Council to entangle humanitarian organizations in Council politics. One has to be careful of the form and manner in which all this is done. I think there is sufficient space to proceed, to move from the total lack of linkage that exists today. I would very much like to see that develop.

At the same time, I want to see greater media and public acknowledgment of the role that the humanitarian organizations are playing. I would encourage all organizations to help publicize this.

The Council's Humanitarian Responsibilities: Sanctions

The second issue which I want to mention is what I have called in the Security Council "the humanitarian responsibilities of the Council." We deal with a lot of issues that have humanitarian dimensions, the implications of which need to be taken into account when the Security Council acts. I want to deal with the issue of sanctions, but first I want to put it in a specific context.

There are refugees and displaced persons in all of the conflicts. The international community has a framework for dealing with refugees. It has many international agreements. And, institutionally, it has the UNHCR. So, when people ask, "what do we do with the refugees?" there is a framework that has been in place for some time.



Another element is timely food distribution. Here, again, we have a framework that can be activated. We have a system. When crises arise, there is a systematic response. Likewise, in the case of human rights violations, there is a framework -- the conventions, and the whole corpus of international humanitarian law. Even if you have outright war, the Geneva Conventions provide a framework against which to judge what is happening.

But, when it comes to sanctions, there is no framework. We have a very rough, blunt and indiscriminate instrument. We need to think much more carefully about the whole question of sanctions and create a concept, an institution, a framework, a manner of action in which sanctions can be implemented. But, the concept must be developed over a period of time. For the moment, many of us are worried that sanctions more often affect the people rather than their leaders. Consequently, sanctions have a doubtful effectiveness.

We must make sanctions more effective, because sometimes there are situations in which sanctions can be very useful. We must look at the cost-benefit analysis and compare the cost of the sanctions and the benefits gained from them. I want to make them more effective *and* more humane. I am calling for more consideration within the Council itself -- to open the discussion a bit, and see how to go about it. The objective is to be more effective and more humane at the same time.

As for effectiveness, from what I have observed, sanctions have an implicit democratic assumption. Johan Galtung wrote about this almost 20 years ago. The assumption works like this: If you impose sanctions on a country, its people are going to suffer. The people who are suffering are going to react. The government will react to protests from the people. Consequently, the government will change its policies and comply with the resolutions of the Security Council.

Well, most of the sanctioned countries are authoritarian regimes that don't give a damn about what the people think. Thus, the democratic assumption is undermined. It simply does not apply. The whole notion of sanctions affecting the people in order to affect the leadership is invalidated. So, we must make a distinction between generalized sanctions that effect the people more than the leadership and targeted sanctions that affect the leadership more than the people.

In order to be a good system, sanctions must be efficient. In order to be efficient, they must affect the conduct of those who took the decisions which led to condemnation by the international community, not the conduct of those who had no part in it. We must now move from the concept to the identification of possible measures.



Now the question of the leadership is absolutely crucial. If you look at the conflicts on the agenda of the Council, legitimate leadership is often missing. These are just factions -- led by people who somehow get money to buy arms and consequently go at it, with the hope of hitting the jackpot and coming out the victor. In these circumstances, targeting the leadership is crucial, because the leaders do not care about the fate of their own people.

The Council and Civil Society

Let me end by saying that we need to develop further linkages between civil society and the Security Council. The groundwork has already been laid by the humanitarian organizations, though it still is not sufficiently acknowledged. Now we have to think creatively about other fields. While I was President of the Council, I received a letter from the Global Commission to Fund the United Nations, with a very interesting proposal on how civil society organizations with experience in conflict resolution can help in the work of the Council.

The big political question is: when issues arrive in the Council, how do we apply preventive diplomacy? How will we develop the instruments we need to keep the peace? Part of the answer may be to enlarge the number of people that are looking at the problem and thinking about it. It would help to bring in some new sources of experience.

Another important thing is the emerging role of personalities. For example, in the case of Africa, President Carter has been playing a very important role in bringing some countries together, having them take initial confidence building steps, etc. They feel comfortable with that. They don't see it as an intervention from abroad or an American intervention. They focus on the person -- his personality, his values and belief that human beings can make a difference. Another example is Julius Nyerere, former President of Tanzania. He was given a mandate by the Organization of African Unity and the Security Council to find a political solution in Burundi. But he turned it down, because he did not want to be the representative of either organization. Instead, he wanted to act on his own. He appreciated the support, but did not want the official titles.

In most of the countries in crisis, the Big Powers are not directly involved. The conflict isn't close to the security interests of the P-5. You have an intractable problem which defies the instruments we have at our disposal. Precisely because of that, the situation is fluid and the experience of additional individuals could be extremely helpful.



I have also promoted more regional input to the Council. We had a meeting this month with the Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity -- Salim Ahmed Salim -- in which we went through his opinions about conflicts on the Security Council agenda. It was extremely useful. We should expand that eventually to include some NGOs from Africa that can help instruct the Council from the perspective of civil society. This sort of regional grounding is very important for the Council's decision-making.

The more intractable the problem, naturally, the more people are open to ideas. I think the space is there objectively. It is not a major political struggle to open the doors of the Council. There are just too many issues closely linked to the feelings and perceptions of civil society. True, it may be difficult in terms of form, because the Council is very conservative in terms of form. It has been doing things a certain way for many years. Change is very difficult. But most of the people who work in the Council understand that they need to open up, as much as possible, to any option or proposal that may be helpful to them in solving the problem.

Let me conclude. I very much wanted to speak to you while I was President of the Council, even though I am speaking on my own behalf. A few weeks ago, I had an opportunity to meet with members of the Working Group before I became Council President, to learn about what you are doing. I will continue to be interested in working with you to develop means for civil society to work with the Council. There are a number of areas where this can be taken further, where new ideas may emerge.

Thank you very much for inviting me.