

## **THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE THIRD WORLD<sup>1</sup>**

The United Nations was born in 1945 at the end of a ghastly World War with different approaches and expectations and they underlie the present pressures and attacks on the Organisation when it is needed more than ever.

For most of the people of the world, it was an organisation to fulfil the wartime declarations on a new world order, to preserve peace by eliminating the root causes of war and to promote freedom and economic and social development all over the world. For some governments, however, it was primarily an institution to settle disputes between countries, negotiate control of armaments and maintain stability: other objectives were secondary.

The Charter of the United Nations espoused lofty purposes. For the maintenance of international peace, it accorded wide powers to the Security Council but only if the five Great Powers agree. For action to eliminate colonialism, racism, inequality, violations of human rights and other causes of conflict, the Organisation was to be mainly a forum for debate, consultation and co-operation.

The Charter was adopted in the name of “We, the people of the United Nations”, but there was little link between the Organisation and the people, except through governments which at the time hardly represented a majority of the world's population. It remained largely a club of governments unable to relate to and promote public movements in support of its purposes.

Since its inception the United Nations has been affected by two contradictory forces which dominated international relations - the struggles of peoples for freedom and the growing danger of nuclear war.

The end of the war marked the beginning of the final stage of the colonial revolution, sweeping away the resistance of Powers which sought to confine the right of self-determination to the “white” nations. Asian, African, Caribbean and other nations emerged from centuries of humiliation and became members of the international community. The membership of the United Nations increased from 51 in 1945 to 159 in 1985. The newly-independent States in the so-called “third world” have constituted the majority for two decades.

1945 also saw the beginning of the nuclear age with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. With the change in the nature of war from a contest between combatants to indiscriminate mass murder, elimination of power politics through disarmament and the democratisation of international affairs became imperative. Instead there was the outbreak of the “cold war” with an arms race, military

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<sup>1</sup> Published in *Third World Impact*, London, April 1986

alliances and bases, and brinkmanship. New theories were advanced that the way to peace is not disarmament - which is a "pie in the sky" - but deterrence through massive armament.

The world has known no peace and security. Millions have perished in colonial wars and fratricidal conflicts fanned by external powers while the threat of nuclear holocaust hung over the world.

World military expenditure has soared to a trillion dollars or much more than the expenditure on education, health and international economic aid combined. The total explosive power of the 50,000 nuclear warheads in the world is equal to a million Hiroshima bombs. The survival of life on the planet depends on the relations between two super-powers. Scientists have calculated that even a "limited" nuclear war between them would result in hundreds of millions of casualties, with many more people dying of starvation and other effects in the third world than in the two nations themselves.

The United Nations has made a great contribution despite the cold war and the obstinacy of imperialists not only in averting, containing or ending numerous conflicts but in many fields of international concern.

The main force behind the accomplishments of the United Nations has been the third world, in co-operation with other governments moved by a feeling of human solidarity. The true spirit of the United Nations was symbolised more by heads of third world governments like Nehru and Nkrumah or public leaders like Dr. W.E.B. DuBois and Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., to name a few, rather than the wielders of military power. Many initiatives for peace, disarmament and a new world order came from the third world governments.

The cynicism and attacks against the United Nations began when the non-aligned States became a majority in the United Nations. Democratisation of the international community was not to the liking of those intent to dominate the third world and retain privilege through power politics.

The United Nations, and indeed the system of international co-operation, are now in a crisis. The International Year of Peace in 1986 must see the beginning of a world movement of governments and peoples for the revitalisation of the United Nations in accordance with its purposes and principles. The progressive governments of the third world - and the third world diaspora - must take the lead in forging the broadest coalition for that purpose.

Most of the governments support the United Nations system for international co-operation, as shown at the observance of the 40th anniversary of the United Nations last year. The six-nation initiatives of the leaders of India, Sweden, Tanzania, Mexico, Argentina and Greece for ending the nuclear threat show the possibilities for concerted action at the governmental level, while the public

campaigns on nuclear disarmament and against apartheid show the possibilities at the public level.

Nuclear disarmament is crucial for human survival, but a determined campaign is also essential on other issues of vital concern. The pouring of “conventional arms” into third world countries has cost untold lives and can trigger even greater dangers. There can be no peace or stability so long as major Powers continue to maintain bases and troops outside their borders, so long as their intelligence agencies sponsor terrorism, so long as they place themselves above international law and so long as a new international economic order is frustrated. The international community must ensure the freedom of South Africa, Namibia and Palestine to eliminate the hotbeds of war and assure the universality of the United Nations.

The detractors of the United Nations try to undermine it because they recognise it as a serious hindrance to their policies. They have military power but are not omnipotent. Megatons of nuclear weapons have not endowed them with the ability to control developments even in their backyards whenever people were determined to resist.

The third world must not be intimidated, it must assert itself as the majority of humankind. That is the only way to save humanity from disaster.