

sunday interview

UN not a talking shop

Q: — Do you envisage a day when the United Nations will have evolved into a supra-national government?

A: — The idea of a supra-national government is an ideal one, an ideal that will take a long long time to materialise for the simple reason that even though the question of internationalism is increasingly being accepted, there is still also an increasing trend towards nationalism. In some cases there is a tendency towards nationalism than towards internationalism.

Because of these factors it becomes more of an ideal to talk of the UN becoming a supra-national government. On the other hand, the UN is perhaps next to what I would consider the ideal situation, the unique international institution through which, one hopes, we can try to build this objective of ultimately creating perhaps not a world government, but at least one inter-dependent world.

Q: — The nation-state system has been around for just about 200 years. Has it ever reached the zenith of political organisation or is a revolution towards a new pattern, just around the corner?

A: — Well, that is philosophy and I do not think it would really engage us into a philosophical discussion on what would be the next stage. But it seems to me that the nationalism that has grown over the years and strengthening of the concept of the nation-state are still the trend of the present day.

What the internationalists would like to see is a greater reliance and commitment towards internationalism rather than nationalism, an objective which is to be realised through different approaches.

First, through the reinforcement of regional co-operation, sub-regional or inter-regional co-operation and, ultimately, through the strengthening of the international entity.

But again this becomes more of an ideal. I still believe that we will still witness the strengthening of the nation-state system for quite some time to come.

Q: — The founding fathers of the UN provided in the Charter for a permanent peace-keeping force. Why has the idea failed to materialise?

A: — The Charter itself does not talk of a permanent peace-keeping force. The UN is based on the assumption of the promotion and preservation of international peace and security. To this effect, it conceptualises ways and means in which the element of peace and security can be sustained. It talks in terms of collective self-defence; it talks in terms of acting under specific provisions of the Charter to preserve the peace, the so-called enforcement measures.

But over the years the UN has evolved the peace-keeping force in an attempt to provide means by which the international community as such can try and maintain some sort of peace in given conflict situations. The peace-keeping force is still one of the most effective instruments of the Organisation. Unfortunately, not much is talked about the peace-keeping force.

But in reality there are UN forces today in a number of crisis areas of the world — the Middle East, Cyprus etc — and we were envisaging a peace-keeping force in Namibia. Unfortunately also, there is a disquieting trend that wherever the UN has kept its force things tend to stabilise and people get satisfied.

The UN force is not meant to stabilise a situation. It is meant to provide an outlet for a solution. The larger question is that the UN has not succeeded effectively in resolving the problems in conflict areas. This is not because of lack of instrumentality; it is not because of lack of peace-keeping forces; but it is because of lack of the necessary political will.

Q: — How can one say that the UN is a forum of equal member-states when the veto power continues to be the privilege of a few, of the "God-fathers" as it

A: — This is a very significant question, particularly when you find that some countries try to criticise the Organisation by saying that because of the growth of the institution there has been what one may call the majority of Third World countries trying to dominate the institution.

The truth is that the Organisation today is perhaps the most representative of the reality of the world situation. The Organisation is based on the principle of sovereign equality of member-states.

But the Charter of the Organisation when it was proclaimed was also built on the concept that in some respects some states are more equal than others. This concept is enshrined through the veto power of certain states. So one can make the criticism that there really is some sense of inequality within the institution.

But, on the other hand, because of the distribution and devolution in the allocation of powers and responsibilities at the General Assembly and the Security Council, I think we have what you may like to consider as a more democratic institution than it was when it was founded. This is not to say it is a perfect institution. In fact, I personally believe that much can be done to improve it and make it more representative.

Q: — Has the veto power been abused?

A: — Definitely. And this is what has led a number of countries to question the whole concept of veto powers. The idea of reforming the Charter is a very controversial one and it is going to be an uphill battle. The idea has been actively opposed by some of the permanent members.

But even with the shortcomings of the institution, the failures of the Organisation so far in some respect have nothing to do with the Charter and rules but rather with the failure of member states to give the Organisation the political weight and support that it deserves.

Q: — Is the UN, therefore, anything more than a talking shop, really?

A: — Oh, definitely. It is now almost a truism that even if you didn't have the UN, given the present situation of international relations, you'd have to invent an institution like this.

The UN is a unique institution in promoting international understanding, international co-operation and the preservation of peace and security. The UN today is engaged in a number of projects and fields: cultural, economic, social, and technical. Unfortunately, not much is talked about them.

But even in the field of international peace and security, the Organisation has done fairly well given the prevailing circumstances.

Even if it was only a talking forum, and it is not a talking forum, it is better that we should have an Organisation where people, instead of resorting to armed conflict, would resort to discussions. So talking is much better than fighting in this sense.

Q: — How close are we to World War III?

A: — To talk in terms of a world war, in my opinion, is an alarmist projection of the world situation. This is not to say that the current state of the international situation should not be a source of concern. There is no doubt that there is an escalation of tension and confrontation among the great powers.

We are on the verge of returning to what has been described as Cold War Two. If we are to reach that state the international situation will be extremely precarious.

So whereas I don't believe we are on the brink of a third world war, it would be a mistake to underestimate the degree of tension that prevails today. It would also be a mistake for us not to do

THE President of the United Nations General Assembly, AMBASSADOR SALIM AHMED SALIM of Tanzania, was in Dar es Salaam this week for an official visit during which he had consultations with President Nyerere and other Government officials on the current international affairs. Staff Writer FILI KARASHANI seized this opportunity to interview Ndugu Salim on various issues in connection with the world organisation.



Ambassador Salim

try and contain the growing confrontation between the great powers and to de-escalate the international tension.

Q: — Are you satisfied with the progress made to date by the UN and by some of its members on the question of independence for Namibia?

A: — Absolutely not. The issue of Namibia now is not so much on the efforts by the United Nations. I think the UN and the General Assembly have done quite substantially in support of the people of Namibia.

The crucial issues are now two. One, the continued intransigence and recalcitrance of the South African regime which continues to defy the UN resolutions and the Security Council position in respect to the UN plan. So the responsibility right now is on the South African regime to comply with the decisions of the Security Council.

As an extension to that, an equal responsibility lies on those Western countries which were in the first place the initiators of the plan which has now been adopted by the Security Council — the plan for the peaceful transition of Namibia to independence. It is also the responsibility of the international community, but it is more the responsibility of those countries with which South Africa has extensive links to put the necessary pressures to bear on South Africa so that it respects the decisions of the Security Council.

Q: — Talking of South Africa, and here I stand for correction, the recent UN General Assembly resolution condemning Britain's violation of the ceasefire agreement on Rhodesia did not come out

specifically calling for the withdrawal of South African troops from the soil of Zimbabwe.

A: — The point is the Lancaster Agreement does not provide for the presence of any foreign forces in Zimbabwe. The presence of South African forces, in whatever form or manner in Zimbabwe, therefore constitutes a violation of the Agreement.

What the UN and the international community as a whole are interested in Zimbabwe is a peaceful transition to independence. We believe that if the London Agreement is to be implemented faithfully, impartially and firmly by the British government (as the colonial power), then there is a real hope for a genuine transformation of Zimbabwe from a war situation to a new Zimbabwe with important implications for the peace and stability of Southern Africa.

This depends on the part of all those who are party to the London Agreement, but more so it depends on the country which is responsible for a scrupulous enforcement of this Agreement — and that is the British government and the British Governor.

Q: — With the collapse of the North-South dialogue, the impasse at UNCTAD and UNIDO, what chances do the poor members of the UN have in pushing for a New International Economic Order through negotiations?

A: — To begin with, change in the present international economic relationship is inevitable. This change can come through an orderly manner, through negotiations between the North and South and co-operation. In other words, an orderly world fashioned process which will

be in the interest of all the countries, the developed and the developing.

Or it will come through a combination of circumstances, through unilateral measures, through desperate actions taken by governments — governments whose economies are on the brink of ruin, governments whose people cry out for change.

What those in the international community who are advocating a New International Economic Order (NIEO) are really saying is that it is in the interest of the rich and the poor to work together, as partners, as bargainers to try and transform the existing order with the least eruptions.

It seems to me that this message is beginning to get through although it is unfortunate that it has not gone far enough in most of the developed world. But I think this year we have a chance to try and transform the rhetoric of the NIEO into something more concrete.

Between now and August there are a number of negotiations within the UN forum aimed at creating the necessary positive conditions for the launching of the new international development strategy and also for the launching of global negotiations.

A special session of the General Assembly will be held in August this year for two purposes. To evaluate the progress on NIEO and to launch global negotiations.

I believe that we have reached a point where this year is going to be crucial in the whole question of North-South relationship. I'll hope that despite setbacks we have had so far, some progress will come through before the special session in August.

I want to stress again that the NIEO is not something which is a negotiable question. The ushering in of the NIEO is a non-negotiable question. How the new order is brought about is the matter for negotiations.

Q: — In view of overwhelming majority of votes in the UN in support of the recent resolution on events in Afghanistan, does the world body now have a clear cut working definition of the concept of intervention?

A: — For every document adopted by the UN or by any other institution for that matter, you will always have people who will give it their own interpretation. But from the Charter of the UN, a number of decisions adopted by the UN resolutions on the question of aggression, on the non-intervention in the domestic affairs of member-states, and on friendly

relations among states — these documents are quite clear and comprehensive. It seems to me that it is on the basis of those resolutions and decisions that member-states were guided to come out ultimately with the resolution on Afghanistan.

Q: — As a career diplomat at the UN and now as President of the august body, has at times your own conscience run in conflict with certain official policies?

A: — Quite honestly, I have never had a situation where the official policy, and I presume by this you mean Tanzania's policy, has in anyway been in conflict with my personal position. I have never had that experience, or predicament if you will.

Also as President of the General Assembly, I have never had that conflict because once you assume the functions and responsibilities of the Presidency then you cease to be the representative of a single country. Since you become a presiding officer of the Organisation as a whole, you do not then have a personal position as such. Neither do you have a Tanzanian position.

In all sincerity, in the course of the General Assembly sessions, there has never been a time when the position of Tanzania on any issue has at any given point been a source of embarrassment or difficulties for me.

Q: — Finally, what would you say have been the main achievements of the 34th session of the General Assembly of which you were President?

A: — First and foremost, the 34th session demonstrated more vividly the significance and importance of the UN itself in the present international situation.

The impressive attendance and participation in the session of world and national leaders was a manifestation of that importance.

Secondly, during the session it became more evident that the world community — including the major powers who on many occasions were not prepared to support the Organisation as much as one would expect — is also beginning to realise that despite the problems and shortcomings, the UN is the only meaningful institution which can and should be used to try and resolve or at least minimise the areas of conflict in the world.

In the economic field there was agreement on the launching of the global negotiations that we have talked about. The Assembly took important steps in support of the people of Namibia, Zimbabwe and Palestine. And there was an important convention on the taking of hostages.

But if I was to characterise the session in brief terms, I would say it was an eventful, significant, sometimes controversial but generally productive session.