

REFLECTIONS ON NEARLY FOUR DECADES

FOR nearly a decade now the UN has been hosting meetings of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) supportive of basic UN resolutions calling for Palestinian independence, an end to Israel's military occupation of Arab lands captured during the 1967 war, and essentially what we all have come to know as the "two-state solution".

Meetings have been taking place at least yearly both in Geneva, for international NGOs, and in New York, mostly for US and Canadian-based NGOs.

A secretariat in Geneva with a name only international bureaucrats could conjure up — the International Coordinating Committee For NGOs On The Question of Palestine (ICCP) — "coordinates" NGOs internationally and publishes a newsletter now in its 43rd issue.

And last year a new very small office was set up in Washington with a part-time staff person (and a monthly struggle to pay its very minimal bills) to serve as the focal point for those pro-Palestinian and pro-peace NGOs, the majority located in North America. As one might suspect, this office has managed to come up with an "appropriate" name as well: North American Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the Question of Palestine (in this case NACC).

From



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The actual legal structure of all this goes back to a General Assembly resolution which established "The Committee On The Exercise Of The Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People". It is this GA-created body which in turn hosts and works with the NGOs, thus making it possible for them to use UN facilities for their meetings both at the Palais in Geneva and UN headquarters in New York.

Now that all this structure is a bit more clear, I hope, just what are we to make of these now rather ritualised gatherings — one of which just concluded at UN headquarters and another of which is to be held in August in Geneva? And does all this NGO activity really do much good for the Palestinians, or are the NGOs themselves the major beneficiaries?

A few weeks ago, for the first time since these non-governmental meetings were initiated some nine years ago, I ventured as an observer into the basement bowels of UN headquarters along New York's East River not quite knowing just what to expect. What I found was occasionally uplifting and interesting, more often than not quite saddening and even maddening. For me personally this trek to the UN was also a visit back in time that took on considerably nostalgic tones.

Back in the early 1970s I cut my international teeth in these corridors. From 1970 through to 1973 I was chief representative of the International Student Movement for the United Nations (Ismun) while first attending law school at New York University in Greenwich Village and then Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of International Affairs.

I began these graduate school years a rather typical post-teenage kid from the American heartland (Minnesota), a rather conventional liberal American Jew (progressive, irreligious, believing most of the stereotypical things one is taught during normal communal rites of passage when one has few other reference points), and one who had not ventured beyond American shores but for a brief journey to Canada.

Five years later, mostly thanks to Ismun — by then a prestigious "Category 1" NGO — I had two advanced academic degrees in hand, had visited over 35 countries, had a completely new circle of friends from just about every corner of the globe, and last but not least had got my feet wet in the Mid-east with "official" visits to both Egypt and Israel.

So much for this slightly self-indulgent nostalgic reflecting. Not only have I personally changed a great deal, but those were far different days in many other ways as well.

The Arabs, most especially the Palestinians, were still in a daze of political-cultural shell-shock from the massive defeat of 1967. Yasser Arafat was about to make his first appearance at the UN — the historic "guns and olive branch" speech impossible to forget for all its symbolism. The cold war was at its zenith with fear of nuclear war much in everyone's consciousness — indeed the Americans actually declared a "nuclear alert" during the 1973

war.

Anwar Sadat, inheritor of Nasser's political perch though not his personal ethos or power, had come into power himself attempting to spark a peace process (as had Nasser before him) only to be rebuffed by both the Americans and the Israelis. Treated at the time more like a buffoon than a serious personality, the unresolved aftermath of the 1967 debacle soon erupted in another war.

It was out of these confrontations of arms that "step-by-step diplomacy" was born and the road to Camp David paved.

And it was in the aftermath of the born-castrated Camp David deal — one which Jimmy Carter so hypocritically still continues to hype as a grand achievement when actually its terms had more to do with American politics and multi-billion largesse than anything else — that the then quite impotent UN kept passing resolutions of one kind or another, hardly any of which anyone in the Mid-east was taking very seriously.

And it was in the aftermath of the Camp David-inspired Israeli destruction of Lebanon — this particular war with the goal of bringing about a further scattering of the Palestinians to their fate and a further consolidation of Israel's hold on the occupied territories — that the General Assembly passed a few more resolutions including the one initiating The Committee On The Exercise Of The Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

The "Ninth United Nations North American NGO Symposium On The Question of Palestine" — the meeting at which I found myself a few days ago — was in legal terms sponsored by this committee and hence, in a sense, by the General Assembly.

Let it first be said that many good and well-meaning individuals are involved in the large number of NGOs (more than 100 I would guess) that in one way or another involve themselves in these efforts. Various human rights and church-related organisations participate, as do a hodgepodge of specifically pro-Palestinian groups quite a few of which exist barely in name only.

In the sense that people do need to meet once and awhile to share information and revel in a feeling of shared concerns, there is indeed an overall positive purpose to these efforts.

Sadly, however, the "reunion" and camaraderie aspects of these affairs may by their largest importance or primary significance. Other dimensions to these undertakings are such that make it difficult to speak of them in very glowing terms.

As governmental and related institutions tend to so often do, the UN has succeeded in a form of coopting of the NGO community. By spreading its umbrella over them it has turned them collectively into an extended clubbish talking-society very much mirroring itself. There's really never been, so far as I can tell, a genuine and serious sense of urgency; nor has there ever been a commitment of resources that would allow the NGO collective to do anything vital or newsworthy even if it should decide to try. On the whole, it seems, the great bulk of the NGOs have simply managed

to plod along from one resolution to one petition; from letter-writing campaigns to peace walks.

On the whole the situation with the NGOs has become rather incestuous as well as, in all too many cases, self-serving. Their events are usually attended mostly by themselves, their publications read mostly by each other, their ways of thinking largely reflected onto each other. While this is a situation some of the old-timers now talk about changing; both the nature of the ICCP and NACC leadership, as well as the deficiency of basic resources, combine to make any instigation of major changes unlikely at best.

And so, year after year, things among the NGOs go on pretty much as they have before. In essence, the NGOs have allowed themselves to be reduced to playing the role of cheerleaders for whatever political plans happen to be on the table at the moment; those not willing to cheer relegated to the sidelines to observe or simply fading away.

It's true, of course, that the very UN orbit within which the NGOs have agreed to function and through which they attempt to coordinate themselves is hardly in the best of times one conducive to bold thinking or imaginative action. If the NGOs were truly to even come up with a plan to attempt to have serious impact beyond their own inbred circles — as they often claim is their goal — a whole new coordinating structure would likely be the first prerequisite.

An excellent example of the basic dichotomy between the concerns expressed by the NGOs and their impotence even to get these concerns heard came on the first day of the recent three-day New York meeting.

Overall the New York meeting simply provided a ready forum for what was on the whole a great deal of commonplace rhetoric about the Palestinian predicament — expressions often heard and quite well-known in such circles for a very long time.

But there were a couple of unusual and highly informative talks, among them *Challenge* magazine editor Michael Schwartz's illuminating discussion of the realities of the Israeli settlement programme — this the focus of my next column.

As important as the information presented by Ms Schwartz — herself a dedicated Israeli activist jailed some years ago for her close relations with Palestinians — no one beyond the NGO circles seems even to have heard the crucial insights and perspective she provided.

And that's just the point. The NGOs have evolved through the UN structure as well as on their own primarily to service themselves, mostly to provide information to each other, pretty much to reach out and interact with themselves. A few have individually tried to go beyond these confines; and a few have had limited successes. Yet even when from within their ranks quite important information and insights are brought forward — such as that offered by Ms Schwartz — the NGOs lack both the mechanisms and the credibility to be heard by anyone but themselves.