

The U.S. Hit List at the United Nations

By Ian Williams

Quietly, and without the fanfare that accompanies the campaign in the mountains of Afghanistan, the administration has begun a long march through multilateral institutions. At the UN and elsewhere, the U.S. has mounted a campaign to purge international civil servants judged to be out of step with Washington in the war on terrorism and its insistence that the U.S. have the last word in all global governance issues.

The first and most prominent to go was Mary Robinson, the former Irish president whose work as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has been acclaimed by human rights groups across the world. Officially, she retired after a one-year renewal of her contract. In fact, the U.S. ferociously lobbied against her reappointment. UN officials and Western diplomats also said she was “difficult to work with”—the usual euphemism for not taking dictation. Most human rights activists see this as precisely her strength in an organization where not rocking the boat seems to be genetically engineered into many officials. The U.S. could not forgive her for her stands on the Middle East issues or for her endorsement last year of the results of the UN’s Durban Conference on Racism, which both the U.S. and Israel walked out of. The rest of the world stayed and adopted a toned-down document, and subsequently Washington began its campaign to force Robinson out.

Another recent victim of the U.S. campaign was Robert Watson, the much-respected chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. On April 19, the U.S. administration succeeded in replacing him with Rajendra Pachauri, an Indian economist. The panel is (or perhaps was is the correct tense) an independent scientific body established to assess the degree of climate change and the contribution

made by human activities such as burning fossil fuels. The panel’s work had come to a consensus, not shared by the Bush administration, that human activity is a factor in climate change. A leaked memo from ExxonMobil had previously asked the White House, “Can Watson be replaced now at the request of the U.S.?” The memo goes on to recommend that the administration “restructure the U.S. attendance at upcoming IPCC meetings to assure none of the Clinton/Gore proponents are involved in any decisional activities.” Apparently, the administration heeded ExxonMobil’s recommendation. Pachauri himself attributes his selection to being the developing world candidate, but environmental NGOs ascribe it to U.S. lobbying.

A few days later, on April 22, the U.S. right achieved a new level of success with the deposition of Jose Mauricio Bustani, the head of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), a mere year after he had been unanimously elected for a second five-year term. The voting was 48 votes to 7 with 43 abstentions. The OPCW was created by the Chemical Weapons Convention, which outlaws the production of chemical weapons. It arranges regular inspections of member countries’ facilities to ensure that no one is cheating. Bustani, a Brazilian, has headed it from its creation five years ago, and his inspectors have overseen the destruction of two million chemical weapons and two-thirds of the world’s chemical weapon facilities in the past several years. They have carried out 1,100 inspections in more than 50 nations.

From the beginning of 2002, however, the U.S. has treated Bustani almost as if he were some form of bureaucratic Bin Laden. Bush administration officials accused him of “ongoing financial mismanagement, demoralization of the Technical Secretariat staff, and ill-considered

initiatives.” Only last year he had been reelected unanimously, with plaudits from all, including Colin Powell. Moreover, his staff pointed out that the organization’s finances and management were controlled not by Bustani but by a U.S. government appointee.

So what had changed? Not Bustani, but Washington. His main persecutor was John Bolton, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security. Bolton earned his right-wing credentials when he served as the house UN-basher for the Heritage Foundation. But his anti-UN convictions have never stopped him taking money from the organization himself. Most recently he served as assistant to James Baker on the failed Western Sahara mission. For years, Bolton had argued that the U.S. should get out of the United Nations. At the same time, however, Bolton served as a consultant to Taiwan advising the government how it could get into the UN, according to *The Nation*. Although Bolton may have flexible principles, like many of Bush’s hard right entourage he has a rigid line in grudges and he soon developed a major one against Bustani.

Having Bolton in charge of disarmament is like letting a pyromaniac have the run of a fireworks factory—as his recent hardnose attitude to nuclear limitation talks with Russia, and staunch advocacy of the “Star Wars,” Strategic Defense Initiative suggests. Bustani first started running into problems when he resisted American efforts to dictate the nationality of the OPCW inspectors assigned to investigate American facilities. What’s more, he had opposed a U.S. law allowing the president to block unannounced inspections in the United States and banning OPCW inspec-

tors from removing samples of its chemicals. Diplomats suggest that Bustani’s biggest “crime” was trying to persuade Iraq to sign the convention, which could mean that OPCW inspectors would inspect Iraqi facilities. The hawks in the administration resented these “ill-considered initiatives.” If Iraq would sign the convention and allow UN inspectors, it would deprive Washington of a quasi-legal justification for military action against Baghdad.

Earlier this year the U.S. asked Brazil to recall him, but the Brazilian government pointed out that Bustani was not a Brazilian appointee but rather was elected unanimously by the entire OPCW. Then Bolton, personally, asked Bustani to resign. After he refused, the U.S. then attempted to have the OPCW Executive Council sack him. Failing that, Washington called for a special session of member states to fire him, threatening that the U.S. would not pay its dues if he were reappointed. Faced with losing an effective and popular disarmament agency, a majority of states succumbed to this blackmail. This acquiescence to Washington was in stark contrast to the willingness of so many countries to defy the U.S. by ratifying the Rome Treaty establishing the International Criminal Court only two weeks before.

In the end, it seems most members of the OPCW, with varying degrees of pragmatism and reluctance, decided that the survival of one of the most successful disarmament organizations was more important than the fate of its director. However, they set an ominous example—and possibly gave the hawks in Washington a strong scent of blood to follow. As Bustani presciently told the kangaroo court, “By dismissing me ... an internation-

al precedent will have been established whereby any duly elected head of any international organization would at any point during his or her tenure remain vulnerable to the whims of one or a few major contributors. They would be in a position to remove any Director-General, or Secretary-General, from office at any point in time.”

To Play, U.S. Must Get Its Way

The right wing has long had a reflex hostility to international and multilateral organizations. But during the Reagan administration, which was the first time that the right wing exercised such control over U.S. policy, there was the fear that the U.S. could not pull out of the UN and leave it in the hands of its cold war enemy. Today, however, the U.S. has no counterweight at the UN, and the Bush administration officials are unabashedly insisting on exercising the influence that comes from being the world’s only superpower. Playing upon its indispensability in this unipolar world, the Bush team is playing hard ball at the UN—in effect, threatening to render the multilateral organization impotent unless it gets its way.

It bodes ill for global affairs the way the administration has managed to achieve these recent coups with little or no public awareness, let alone discussion. In the case of Mary Robinson, the U.S. did fear that any open campaign to unseat her would upset Irish American voters. Instead of tapping its public diplomacy, the administration used stealth tactics against Robinson. Human rights organizations complained, but this administration has successfully sidelined these organizations from foreign policy decisionmaking and now

routinely dismisses the concerns of these organizations.

Who is the next target? It may be Hans Blix, who heads UNMOVIC, which is the UN organization established at the end of the Persian Gulf War to inspect Iraqi arms facilities. It's been reported that Paul Wolfowitz, Under Secretary of Defense, ordered a CIA investigation of Blix. One reason that the administration is concerned is that under the framework supported by Powell, if Blix's team goes into Iraq and gives the regime a clean bill of health, then the sanctions regime against Iraq will be largely terminated. For Wolfowitz and other hardliners, this eventuality would remove another main *causus belli* against Baghdad. Deposing the highly respected Blix, who formerly headed the International Atomic Energy Authority, would facilitate the administration's case for launching a war on Baghdad.

It's also likely that included on the administration's hit list are the individuals on the proposed fact-finding mission to Jenin that have found disfavor with the Sharon government. One was Mary Robinson, who has

already been ousted. The others were Terje Roed Larsen, one of the main agents in establishing the Oslo channel that led to what was once the peace process, and currently the UN's special coordinator for the peace process. Although half-heartedly defended by Shimon Peres, it will be difficult to keep him in position when he has "lost the trust" of Sharon, and presumably his allies in the U.S. administration. The third person the Israelis regarded as biased is Peter Hansen, the recently reappointed Commissioner General of UNRWA, the U.S.-funded agency that helps Palestinian refugees. Hansen was appointed by the Secretary General Kofi Annan, who angrily sprang to the defense of all three individuals criticized by Israel. But Annan may find it hard to stand behind monitors criticized by the U.S. and Israel, especially if the U.S. would threaten to cut off its funding of UNRWA, which would likely result in starvation in the Palestinian refugee camps.

Kofi Annan, himself, may also be targeted soon. Even though he has only just started his second term, and even though he is immensely popular, Kofi

Annan has recently become stronger in his public exasperation with Sharon's behavior. Given the recent pattern of arrogant American diplomacy, one cannot help but suspect that, but for Colin Powell and Shimon Peres—who have a strong rapport with the secretary-general—the anti-Iraq and pro-Sharon hardliners in the Bush administration will soon begin a campaign to invite Annan to retire. It's likely that they will first suggest that he could retire with honor and that this decision would be for his own good. If that strategy doesn't work, they will likely accuse him of managerial incompetence and inability to work well with member states combined with yet another threat to withhold dues.

If the U.S. purges continue and rise to higher levels, other UN member nations may regret their pandering to Washington as they see the entire post-World War II framework of multilateralism start to disintegrate.

(Ian Williams

<uswarreport@igc.org> writes for Foreign Policy In Focus and is the author of The UN for Beginners.)