

# The UN Keeps Failing, Right When We Really Need It

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It is the world's most important organization, yet remains one of its most dysfunctional.

This week a former United Nations employee described a pervasive culture of impunity inside the organization - one in which whistle-blowers are punished for exposing wrongdoing. James Wasserstrom, a veteran American diplomat, said he was fired from his job and detained by U.N. police - who searched his apartment and placed his picture on wanted posters - after he reported possible corruption among senior U.N. officials in Kosovo.

"It's supposed to be maintaining the ideals of human rights, the rule of law and anti-corruption," Wasserstrom said in an interview. "And it doesn't adhere to them on the inside."

The United Nations is under attack as well for its [decision last month](#) to pay no compensation to the families of 8,000 Haitians who died and 646,000 who fell ill from a 2010 cholera outbreak that experts believe Nepalese U.N. peacekeepers set off in the country.

The organization, though, remains a vital tool. On Thursday, President Barack Obama used [a White House meeting](#) with U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to pressure North Korea. Administration officials hope that [punishing new U.N. economic sanctions](#), supported by China for the first time, will cause North Korea to end its saber rattling.

"It's important for North Korea, like every other country in the world," Obama said, "to observe the basic rules and norms that are set forth, including a wide variety of U.N. resolutions."

The United Nations has been, and will always be, an imperfect institution. Its greatest strength - and weakness - is its 193 member states. Getting a

majority to agree on major issues, pass reform or refrain from political patronage can be maddening. Russia's shameful blocking of Security Council action against Syria, for example, has shown the continued limitations of that antiquated body.

But the United Nations is likely to grow more important in the years ahead as Washington's fiscal problems curtail U.S. overseas ambitions. Sadly, as the United Nations enters a potentially dangerous phase of peacekeeping missions, Ban's leadership is lacking.

The 68-year-old former South Korean foreign minister has **highlighted** the need to combat global warming, create sustainable development and increase the number of women in leadership positions. But he has failed to provide the dynamic leadership and reforms the institution desperately needs.

"It's a very mixed record," said a senior United Nations official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "He spends a lot of time in Davos, the Arctic Circle or Monaco, and meanwhile there are critical issues - such as the future of peacekeeping - facing a real crisis."

To the alarm of some, the United Nations is returning to the ambitious peacekeeping operations of the 1990s - some of which ended disastrously.

The Security Council last month **authorized** the creation of a 3,000-soldier-strong U.N. "intervention brigade" in Congo, with an unprecedented mandate to fight with government troops against rebels, or on its own. An 11,000-troop United Nations **peacekeeping mission** is also expected to arrive in Mali as French forces wind down their battle against militants there. A mission in Somalia is possible as well.

"We're talking about a new era of big demands on peacekeeping," said Kieran Dwyer, spokesman for the U.N. Department of Peacekeeping Operations. "We are on the cusp."

Current and former U.N. officials worry about a repeat of the 1990s debacles. Undermanned, poorly equipped peacekeepers with vague instructions about when to use force were deployed to Somalia, Rwanda and Bosnia. Civilians who expected to be protected were abandoned.

In by far the most shameful case, 500,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus died in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The 1995 U.N. promise to protect the town of Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia also proved fallacious, and 8,000 Muslim men and boys were executed.

Current and former U.N. officials fear that the "intervention brigade" in Congo sets a dangerous precedent. And poorly equipped U.N. peacekeepers in Mali will be no match for committed jihadists.

"Well-established principles of peacekeeping are being set aside," said the U.N. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "I don't think the long-term implications are being thought through."

Meanwhile, American officials are calling for sweeping management reform at the United Nations, which spent **\$769 million on travel alone** over the last two years, eight times the amount budgeted. The United Nations has cut **some spending**, but proposals to modernize its operations have stalled in the fractious General Assembly.

Employee unions and their allies have blocked a measure that would force U.N. staff, like most other diplomats, to rotate between hardship posts in war zones and posh postings in New York, Geneva and Rome. Firing employees - even those caught stealing from the organization - takes an enormous amount of effort in the U.N.'s ponderous internal justice system.

Wasserstrom, the whistle-blower, says the problem lies with top U.N. managers, including Ban, who call for reform but do little. In a six-year legal battle, Ban's office challenged every aspect of Wasserstrom's claim, he said.

In a landmark victory last year, a judge in the U.N.'s internal judicial system ruled that Wasserstrom was the victim of retaliation. Yet a U.N. review panel in March awarded Wasserstrom only \$65,000 of the \$3.2 million he sought in damages, a move he said was designed to discourage whistle-blowers.

In a letter to Secretary of State John Kerry this week, Wasserstrom called for the State Department to enforce an American law that requires the withholding of 15 percent of American aid to the UN if the organization does not have adequate whistle-blower protections in place.

A new system put in place in 2006 to defend whistle-blowers is failing, according to a study by the Government Accountability Project, an American organization that defends whistle-blowers. The group found that the U.N.'s ethics office received at least 343 inquiries from whistle-blowers about protection against retaliation as of last June, but only 1 percent of the claims were ultimately validated as retaliation. In the letter, Wasserstrom said that track record "defies logic, probability and common sense."

Wasserstrom's case, the Haiti outbreak and the new peacekeeping missions are examples of the U.N.'s worst dynamics. Unwilling to take major risks themselves, member states ask the organization to solve the world's most complex problems. U.N. staffers, meanwhile, blame all of their difficulties on members not giving them enough resources. Both sides can be more committed, intrepid and innovative.

As Washington steps back in the world, a dynamic United Nations must step forward. So far, the U.N. of Ban Ki-moon has not been up to the task.