**The U.N. Security Council’s great disappearing act**

By Colum Lynch

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The United Nations' renovation of its landmark headquarters has effectively drawn a curtain of secrecy around the proceedings of the U.N. Security Council, dramatically reducing public access to members of the world's most powerful international security body.

In the past four months, public appearances by the world body's 15 members have dropped precipitously, with Security Council presidents making 20 percent fewer appearances before the Security Council camera stakeout compared with a year ago. The decline is more dramatic for the 14 other members of the council, who have made 64 percent fewer appearances than last year, according to new data compiled by the Columbia University-affiliated think tank, the Security Council Report.

The findings underscore the importance the physical layout of the original U.N. headquarters building -- which provided sweeping neutral spaces and a sprawling delegates' lounge where diplomats mingled freely with reporters -- had played in promoting greater openness of the council's workings. They constitute the first hard evidence to support what reporters and many diplomats have already realized anecdotally -- that the renovation has essentially altered the way that news is gathered and diplomacy is conducted at the United Nations. However, the data does not account for the way in which the new quarters have sharply curtailed the kind of informal contacts reporters and non-council members had with council diplomats at the previous site.

"The Security Council has never been very accessible, but now it is even less so," Christian Wenaweser, Liechtenstein's U.N. ambassador, told Turtle Bay. But he said an even larger problem than the reduction in public appearances by council members is the closure of the delegates' lounge, where council members and other prominent diplomats used to meet each day for coffee and informal networking. "The renovation has had an impact on our work. I spend less time at the U.N. as I used to. There is no place to go, and no reason to go. In the old days, I would be at the U.N. once a day to see who was there. ... People now only go to the U.N. if they have a special reason, a meeting or a speech to deliver; then they go back home. The information flow among the ambassadors is not the same."

The diminished appearances in the council are due to a host of logistical challenges that have arisen since the U.N. moved the council's chamber to cramped, less-accessible temporary quarters in the U.N. basement in April. But it also reflects measures taken by the five permanent members of the Security Council, including the United States, to reduce the number of U.N. officials allowed into closed-door session -- including U.N. press officials that traditionally kept journalists abreast of the council's activities and alerted reporters when council meetings were about to end. And the council recently ordered the removal of a second camera trained on the council entrance that allowed reporters to monitor diplomats entering and exiting the council chamber.

"There is no doubt that the constraints of the new temporary facilities are a key factor in [the reduction of public appearances], including the distance between the stake out venue from the new locations for the U.N. press corps," according to the Security Council Report. "Although the new facilities are temporary, the physical status quo seems likely to prevail for some time and there is therefore a real risk that the information status quo will become a permanent habit."

The report's findings hint at suspicions among reporters, many diplomats, and other observers that the Security Council's big powers -- including the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France -- have taken advantage of the renovation to impose greater secrecy over the council's deliberations. In the first weeks after the move, the council imposed a series of sweeping restrictions that limited press movement to a tightly cordoned area and blocked non-members of the Security Council from entering the council chamber. The U.N. stakeout camera previously stationed outside the council -- requiring council diplomats to walk past it -- is now positioned far from the council chamber, requiring diplomats go out of their way to hold a press conference.

"Appearances of the council president and other council members at the media stakeout have proved over the years to be a major source of insight to the informal work of the council," according to the Security Council Report. "Such appearances have significantly improved the transparency of the council and the information available to member states and the wider public -- especially since the advent of the U.N. webcast archive. However questions have arisen since the relocation of the Security Council in April 2010 to new temporary premises regarding ongoing transparency."

In the weeks following the move, the Security Council yielded to pressure from the U.N. Correspondent's Association and the U.N. diplomat corps to restore some of those lost privileges, including measures that permitted non-council members the right to wait in the council's lounge for the council's deliberations to end. The council also agreed to allow U.N. reporters access to a stairwell outside the council, so they could interview council diplomats as they left the building. But the findings show that the changes have not stalled the council's retreat from the public. In fact, in recent weeks, the council has taken new steps to restrict outside scrutiny of its work, ordering the removal of a second U.N. camera that monitors diplomat's going in and out of the council chamber. "It has never been made clear why the camera was removed," said Louis Charbonneau, a Reuters reporters who as vice president of the U.N. Correspondent's Association has been trying to get the camera restored.

The United States has defended the decision to restrict the number of U.N. officials from closed-door Security Council sessions on the grounds that there is value in ensuring that the content of such meetings remain confidential. But the U.S. insists that it has worked strenuously to ensure that the U.N. press corps has as much access as possible, and that it has studiously given reporters advance warning when Susan E. Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, or other senior U.S. officials are planning to brief the press.

"The U.S. mission wants reporters at the U.N. to have the same access to officials and diplomats as they did in the old Security Council space. And we've been working with the U.N. and our council colleagues to make that happen," Mark Kornblau, the spokesman for the U.S. mission to the United Nations, told Turtle Bay. "In response to UNCA's concerns about freedom of movement, the U.S. mission led the effort to restore journalists' access to the staircase leading to the Security Council chamber, so that reporters can now -- and once again -- approach diplomats on their way into and out of the chamber. If someone wants to make a request of the U.S. mission to work with our colleagues on the Security Council and encourage the U.N. to turn the camera back on facing the door, we don't have any problem with that."

Those measures have improved access, according to UNCA representatives, but they have not fully addressed a press policy that appears increasingly arbitrary, with responsibility divided between U.N. officials and the staff of the Security Council's rotating presidency. While some countries, like the United States, Britain, and France, have a tradition of responding to press demands for information, many of the council's members don't. And they routinely provide reporters with advance warning when their top officials plan to address to press.

For instance, Mexico, which held the presidency in June, sent routine emails to reporters with detailed updates on all the council's activities. But Lebanon, which held the presidency in May, had virtually no informal channels with the press. The U.N. Security Council Affairs division, which has traditionally played a discrete role in supporting the work of the council's 15 members but which has virtually no contact with the press corps, is responsible for informing the U.N. press office when a meeting is about to end. But the Security Council Report's study faulted the Security Council Affairs division, suggesting it had not provided "timely liaison" with other interested parties, presumably the press.

Charbonneau said that members of the U.N. press corps -- who have been relocated to the U.N. library,,a good 10 minute walk from the Security Council -- are often given insufficient warning time to make their way across the U.N. campus before the meeting ends. There is a shortcut that can get you to the council in half the time by walking through the U.N. basement, but at least two reporters, including a CNN employee and a Lebanese reporter, have gotten trapped in a high- security revolving door en route to the council.

Charbonneau also recalled hearing Russia's U.N. ambassador Vitaly I Churkin, who served as the Security Council president, start his briefing to the press just as the U.N. press office announced he was planning to deliver it. "He was starting to open his mouth but he had to stop because the squawk was so loud," Charbonneau said. Churkin was gone by the time the rest of the press corps arrived.