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## AN INTERVIEW WITH U.N. SECRETARY-GENERAL KOFI A. ANNAN

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*Kofi Annan was elected secretary-general of the United Nations on December 17, 1996 to serve a five-year term of office. A national of Ghana, he took up the post after more than three decades of high level service with the world organization. His previous positions include under-secretary-general for Peacekeeping Operations, controller and assistant secretary-general for Human Resources Management. In addition to U.N. Headquarters in New York, Mr. Annan has served in Addis Ababa, Cairo, Geneva and Ismailia (Egypt), and he has carried out sensitive diplomatic assignments in Iraq and the former Yugoslavia.*

*In An Agenda for Peace, your predecessor Boutros Boutros-Ghali wrote that the "time of absolute and exclusive sovereignty . . . has passed [and] its theory was never matched by reality." Do you agree with this statement? If so, how can the United Nations help member states balance the needs of good domestic governance with the requirements of global interdependence?*

I agree that the era of absolute sovereignty, as asserted in the past, cannot be sustained in contemporary conditions. In the years since the founding of the United Nations, we have lived in an interdependent world, a world in which no state has complete control over its destiny. State sovereignty retains its validity as a defining principle of international society and a governing rule in international relations, but the concept has evolved. No longer an absolute barrier to the outside world, it must, in extreme circumstances, give way to the overriding moral imperative to alleviate human suffering, including systematic violations of human rights, and to achieve common benefits on a global or regional framework.

There are many ways in which the United Nations can help balance the needs of good governance with the requirements of global interdependence. Norm-setting and technical assistance for institution-building are but two. One

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*U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan responded to questions submitted jointly by The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs and the HEI Journal of International Affairs, published by the Geneva Institute of International Affairs.*

of the primary functions of the deliberative bodies of the United Nations is to serve as a forum for states to develop international norms and standards that regulate conduct. On an operational level, through its development work and peace-building activities, the United Nations can assist member states in reforming and strengthening national institutions that will help them fulfill the values and principles of the U.N. Charter.

*Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and transnational corporations have taken on more influential roles in international affairs. How is the United Nations adjusting to deal with the power of these nonstate actors?*

The United Nations cannot help but feel the growing influence of these nonstate actors and must adjust. A partnership between the United Nations, governments and civil society is forming. For some components of the U.N. system, this partnership goes back many years. From their inception, the U.N. programs, funds and agencies that deal with development and humanitarian affairs have worked in the field with NGOs. More new is the effort on the political and peace-keeping side of the United Nations to cultivate relationships with nonstate actors. Thus focal points for relations with research institutions, advocacy organizations and the academic community are being established within the Secretariat and channels for regular communication and consultation are opening. The flow of information is two-way, with each side benefitting from the different perspectives and experience of the other. But, the relationship is more than one of information flow; the United Nations and the governments that make up its membership are actively working with nongovernmental partners around the world to promote economic growth, political stability and social justice. Driving this movement is a recognition that the world's problems have become so complex and intertwined that they must be tackled from different angles, drawing on the comparative advantages of the public and private sectors. The challenge for the United Nations and other intergovernmental organizations is to learn to work in harmony with these nonstate actors, with each side complementing the efforts of the other.

*How can the United Nations work in partnership with the global business community to address fundamental challenges such as poverty, unemployment and sustainable development?*

The link between the global business community and the United Nations is more important than ever. Foreign direct investment has become a critical resource for development, along with direct government aid, and the resulting economic growth, if equitable and sustainable, can promote political stability. The United Nations, therefore, has a keen interest in helping to create the conditions for a strong private sector in developing countries. U.N. programs, funds and specialized agencies have provided financial and technical assistance for public administration reform, for economic restructuring, for privatization programmes and for essential infrastructure, as well as for the strengthening of legal and regulatory frameworks. In doing so, they have strived to ensure that the benefits of growth and economic globalization are

spread to the poorest countries and to the 60 percent of the world's population that must subsist on \$2 or less per day. And, they have sought to ensure that the development they promote is environmentally sustainable.

*Do you view international public opinion as capable of compelling even the most powerful states today to follow a particular course in decision-making?*

Public opinion rarely compels a particular course of action, but it can influence the international political agenda and force policy-makers to focus on issues and crises that they might not otherwise be willing to deal with. Beyond that, international public opinion can restrict the range of options open to governments. In the face of severe humanitarian crises, for example, doing nothing is not an option when the world public cries out for action. How to react—unilaterally, in a coalition or through the United Nations; diplomatically, providing humanitarian assistance or by sending peace-keepers—is often a subject of debate, but not reacting at all is rarely an option if the crisis has piqued the conscience of humankind.

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*Recently, nonstate actors such as international criminal organizations, religious movements and terrorist groups have played a growing role in international problems. Is it the role of the United Nations to get involved in such problems? How will the United Nations address these problems?*

Organized crime, ethnic and religious conflict and terrorism are all part of a complex array of problems that pose fundamental threats to societies and the global social order—and are thus of urgent concern to the United Nations. They are of a piece with such horrors as civil war, use and sale of illegal drugs, illicit trade in arms, trafficking in women and children and extremist violence in all forms—including xenophobia, politically motivated killing and even genocide.

As 117 national leaders declared at the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, these menacing problems constitute “compelling and urgent reasons for action by governments individually and, as appropriate, jointly, to foster social cohesion while recognizing, protecting and valuing diversity.”

Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, cultural and religious diversity, social justice and the special needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, democratic participation and the rule of law—all are vital components in the quest for humane, safe, tolerant and just societies, which was proclaimed 52 years ago in the Charter of the United Nations.

*How does the United Nations determine when to recognize a new state, such as Croatia or Bosnia?*

Strictly speaking, the United Nations does not "recognize" states. When a new entity comes into being that claims to be a state, if it applies for membership in the organization, the Security Council and the General Assembly decide; if they approve, then the new entity is clearly considered a state, as the United Nations is only open to membership by states. Even if such an entity does not apply for membership or is refused, that does not necessarily indicate lack of statehood; if invited to intergovernmental conferences or to become a party to treaties, this would also indicate that it is deemed to be a state.

*The United Nations is sharing responsibilities with other international bodies in addressing certain problems. For example, military activities in Bosnia were taken on by the United Nations and NATO, and the elections were overseen by the OSCE. Do you expect that future regional conflicts will be addressed by regional security groups? How can the roles of regional organizations and the United Nations change to better compliment each other?*

Indeed, the United Nations has cooperated more with regional organizations in recent years, particularly in peacemaking and peacekeeping operations.

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Such cooperation will continue, as the United Nations is incapable of taking on all of the world's problems and often regional organizations are better-suited to addressing aspects of a conflict. The special knowledge and influence they may have with regard to a local conflict, as well as the willingness in some cases to act more quickly than the world organization, are important assets. On the other hand, the universal membership of the United Nations gives it unique legitimacy and influence and means that the resources of the entire international community can be brought to bear on a conflict situation. Cooperation between them, which takes many forms, should draw on the comparative advantages of each and should be well-coordinated, ideally with one organization clearly in the lead. You mentioned the relationship between the United Nations and NATO in Bosnia, which has been very good since the signing of the Peace Agreement in late 1995. The experience prior to then—although cooperation was much better than portrayed in the media—taught us important lessons about the difficulty

of conducting peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations concurrently in the same place. Another mode of cooperation is through successive deployments, when a non-U.N. enforcement operation is followed by a U.N. peacekeeping operation. When the transition is managed well, as was the case in

Haiti, these operations can be very successful. The key from the U.N. side is to ensure that the conditions are ripe for peacekeepers to take over so that they are not thrown into a situation they have neither the mandate nor resources to handle.

*Individual states are ill-equipped to deal with many of the environmental problems of today. What is the role of the United Nations in continuing momentum toward greater cooperation regarding global environmental issues?*

Many environmental issues, including climate change, the protection of biodiversity, the pollution of air and water, have major transboundary aspects and require interstate cooperation. Since the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, the United Nations through UNEP (U.N. Environment Program) has established a strong track record in facilitating that cooperation by collecting and disseminating data on environmental problems, assisting governments in creating or improving policy, legislative and institutional frameworks for environmental protection and helping governments reach agreements on important environmental conventions. The 1992 Rio Conference took a major step forward in bringing about high level political agreement on Agenda 21, a comprehensive program of action aimed at integrating environment and development policies and actions. It also produced agreement on three major conventions, on climate change, the protection of biodiversity and desertification. For the future, I consider that it will be important for the United Nations to continue playing a major role in the four following areas: (i) providing a source of authoritative information and data on the environment; (ii) assisting governments in the formulation and implementation of effective policies to deal with environment and sustainable development problems, including in such increasingly important areas as consumption and production patterns and trade and the environment; (iii) assisting governments in the implementation of relevant international conventions; and (iv) facilitating the provision of financial and technology assistance that may be required by developing countries for environment and sustainable development.

*Thank you for your comments.*



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