

“Truth and Reconciliation” to be Debated at the United Nations

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The press conference held by Jordan’s Ambassador to the UN to introduce Jordan’s presidency of the UN Security Council for the month of January 2014 included a surprise proposal that distinguished it from the usual tradition of announcing the program of work for the Security Council for the month.(1)

The surprise was the announcement of an Open Debate planned for the Council meeting on January 29.

Though it is common to propose an Open Debate as part of a monthly Security Council program, this Open Debate, as proposed, is in the context of a profound issue — the UN’s role as an advocate for peace in the international community.

The description in the Security Council program for January includes the plan for this Open Debate on the topic of the, “Maintenance of International Peace and Security: War, its lessons, and the search for a permanent peace.”

In response to a question for more background on the planned meeting to discuss the broad issues of war and peace, Prince Zeid Ra-ad Zeid al Hussein (Zeid Ra’ad), Jordan’s UN Ambassador, explained that 10 years ago, on January 26, 2004 the Security Council held a discussion on, “National Reconciliation and the Role of the UN.”(2) He said that this had been, “a one of a kind debate, a very good debate. But in the last 10 years we haven’t taken the discussion forward,” he observed.

It is, he explained, “remarkable in one way how we haven’t dealt with it properly in the last almost 70 years of UN practice.”

Responding to a question about the relevance of the South African experience of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to what he was proposing, Prince Zeid remarked that it represented, “a foundational moment, a very important truth and reconciliation commission.”

He described that there have been about twenty-one national commissions, but that the support by the UN has been far fewer than that, that less than 10 were supported by the UN. “Yes it is a mechanism,” he observed, supporting the need for relevant UN expertise.

Speaking from his own personal experiences in the field, rather than that of his government or that of the Security Council, he proposed that peace efforts to settle a serious conflict must merge with a deeper reckoning of the historical narrative of the nation involved. In the two or three situations where he had been charged by the UN to look into needed

mechanisms of conflict resolution, however, he found that there were no organized national archives, no memory of the state as such that exists and that is workable. This weakness made it difficult to carry out the processes needed to have a more long lasting means of resolving a conflict.

Prince Zeid noted that just as the UN sends peacekeepers, it also sends specialists to deal with the logistics, with the physical needs of a destroyed country. But as in his experience in the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, he came across many people who needed help in other ways, with trauma and so forth. "And how you deal with that?", he asked.

"More so," he continued, "you come to realize that there's a deeper issue at hand, that there are conflicting narratives. And there is the truth. After all there is the truth as well. And its not that you can make up or contrive a narrative. There is a truth that has to be identified, and how do we do that, it is intensely difficult," Prince Zeid elaborated.

"Truth commissions..., can lead the way," he noted, "the thing is you have to mainstream it more within the system," he explained.

"And there needs to be more of a UN expertise in this," he argued, "This is something we are hoping the Council will pick up and will understand better."

At the end of the press conference, the Jordanian Mission made available a Concept Paper that it drafted for the January 29, 2014 Security Council debate. The concept paper, "War, its Lessons, and the Search for a Permanent Peace?" introduces the issues to be considered in the Open Debate.⁽³⁾ "What the UN has not understood well enough," the paper maintains, "is how it can help forge a deeper reconciliation among ex-combatants and their peoples, based on an agreed or shared narrative, a shared memory, of a troubled past."

The concept paper recognizes that a component of a conflict is conflicting narratives among the warring sides. It seeks out examples of "meaningful reconciliation based on shared historical understanding helping to cement lasting peace." But historical memory must be based on a determination of the truth, a truth that has been "properly determined, understood and agreed to by the former warring sides."

To make this process possible, the Jordanian presidency of the Security Council is inviting delegations to reflect on positive examples and the lessons that can be learned from these examples. "How might these lessons be drawn upon to create models of best practice that can be applied in existing and future post-conflict situations?" the paper asks.

Also the concept paper proposes that the Security Council consider mandating, "a small UN historical advisory team" which would help to gather and recover relevant documents and assist in the "early work of setting up a 'functional' national archive, or even a historical commission" in post conflict situations.

These proposals raise a set of issues not often explored or considered at the UN. Will the Jordanian presidency of the Security Council find the means to gain support for its proposals? Will the concept paper and the Security Council debate discussing the paper give the issue of truth and reconciliation serious consideration? If so, it would be refreshing.

Notes

1) Press Conference , Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zedi Al-Hussein (Jordan), President of the Security Council on

the programme of work for the month of January 2014 – Press Conference, 6 Jan 2014.

<http://webtv.un.org/watch/prince-zeid-raad-zedi-al-hussein-jordan-president-of-the-security-council-on-the-programme-of-work-for-the-month-of-january-2014-press-conference/3019229612001/>

2) Security Council Transcript pt.1, January 26, 2004, S/PV.4903, SC/7990
“Post Conflict National Reconciliation, Role of the UN.”

http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.4903

Security Council Transcript pt.2, January 26, 2004, S/PV.4903(Resumption 1)+Corr. 1, SC/7990
“Post Conflict National Reconciliation, Role of the UN.”.

http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.4903%28Resumption1%29

Summary of Meeting January 26, 2004, SC/4903 AM and PM Meeting, IN PRESIDENTIAL STATEMENT, SECURITY COUNCIL REAFFIRMS ‘VITAL IMPORTANCE’ OF UNITED NATIONS’ ROLE IN POST-CONFLICT RECONCILIATION

<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/sc7990.doc.htm>

3) Jordanian Mission at the UN, “War, its Lessons, and the Search for a Permanent Peace?”, Concept Note for Thematic Debate 29 January 2014.

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