-A New Spring for the UN?-
Kofi Annan unveils ambitious agenda

By Oli Brown

Rather appropriately, Kofi Annan chose the first day of spring to present his report, ‘In Larger Freedom’ to the United Nations General Assembly.

His report, years in the making, sets out a package of reforms to strengthen the UN by streamlining the deliberations of the General Assembly and expanding the Security Council.

Not content with this daunting task, Annan also outlines an ambitious agenda to promote the three ‘great purposes’ of the United Nations: development, security and human rights.

Annan hopes that this report will herald a new spring for the UN and for multilateralism. It certainly comes at an opportune time. The UN has been deeply wounded by divisions over the war in Iraq, the US rejection of multilateralism and documented corruption in the Iraqi oil-for-food programme.

With two years left in his term, Kofi Annan also seems to have an eye on his legacy as Secretary General. He has staked much of his moral legitimacy and political capital on reasserting the UN’s role at the very heart of world security.

In his speech to the General Assembly Annan urged world leaders to accept the entire reform package rather than ‘cherry-pick’ the changes they favour. He has set the clock ticking for a decision by the time of a summit for world leaders in September.

With a decade left before the 2015 deadline of Millennium Development Goals, 2005 will be a crucial year if the world is not to fall further behind schedule in meeting these targets.

More controversial are his suggestions for reform of the Security Council. The big question is whether the five permanent members will relinquish their anachronistic primacy and veto.

Yet, important as a representative and responsive Security Council is, Annan’s suggestions for reform outside of the UN structure are arguably more essential to world stability.

Annan urges developed countries to create a more development-oriented trade system and increase development assistance, with more debt relief.

Meanwhile, the report urges developing countries to improve governance, combat corruption and implement national development strategies.

Yet, if history is any teacher, the inconsistent attention of the world community will likely focus on the horse-trading politics of reform to the Security Council rather than the concrete steps that individual member states should take to put their own houses in order.
The trade policies of the developed world are at the overlap of development and security, two of the three ‘great purposes’ of the UN. Current trade policy in OECD countries denies vital market access to the developing world’s products, particularly their agricultural goods. Escalating tariffs for manufactured goods inhibit their economic diversification while subsidies to developed country producers lead to the ‘dumping’ of artificially cheap products, undermining both local industry and livelihoods.

In essence, the poorly designed and unfair trade policies of the developed world inhibit economic growth in the developing world, and leave developing country governments and producers locked into commodity markets notorious for the volatility of their prices. And faltering economic growth coupled with unpredictable government revenues has a dramatic knock-on impact on political and economic stability.

In his report Annan advances the idea that the entire world has a ‘responsibility to protect’ citizens from genocide, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity in countries where national authorities are unable or unwilling to protect their own citizens.

But the world community should also accept that it has a ‘responsibility to prevent’ its trade policies contributing to the emergence of violent conflict.

A positive step towards this goal would be to act on the many recommendations in this report.

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