

The United Nations in a world of conflict

Assuming our responsibilities



Remarks by Erskine Childers at
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Some eighty years ago a French Government Minister remarked that 'war is far too serious a matter to be left to Generals'. This morning there are over 120 conflicts simmering or raging across the world. One in every 130 human beings alive is a displaced person. Governments are investing in the United Nations System for all purposes, including peace-keeping and humanitarian relief, a total amount per year that represents about one dollar and ninety cents per human being alive; they are investing in military expenditure over one hundred and twenty dollars per human being every year. Clearly, if war is too serious a matter to be left to generals, it is also too serious a matter to be left to governments alone.

But when the Cold War apparently ended there was a rush of optimism that now, at last, there could be peace in our time. The major powers declared that now they would do what they had claimed in 1945 they alone could do when insisting on their special privileges in the new United Nations – now they really would be 'the policemen of the world' for all of us inferior, ordinary people. What has gone wrong, so quickly? Let me first offer my own basic answer to this question.

There should not have been any surprise. The Cold War was a massive distraction from, but also a new framework for suppressing, peoples' discontent over the cultural, ethnic, political and economic legacies of the age of Northern empires. These conditions have been further aggravated by the conduct of the powers over the last forty years. Yes, of course, since the three-quarters of humankind in the South are human, their leaders have made mistakes in the same period. But the peoples of the South have never to this day been free to make their own mistakes. The acts of independence thirty years ago were, in reality, little more than the surface legalisms of a decolonisation that has never yet been completed. Suddenly, for the first time in centuries the framework of suppression is weak, and one society after another is unravelling and exploding in conflict.

We must act now to re-direct the attention of our governments to the whole spectrum of human conflict – from its root causes, to the earliest signs that those causal conditions are turning into the consequence of mass unrest, on along the spectrum to the necessity of trying to prevent actual conflict, and further along it, when prevention fails, trying to protect human rights, alleviate mass suffering, restore peace and re-build better society.

The non-governmental community must mobilise to respond, and to get governments in the United Nations to respond better, to the active conflictual part of the spectrum. But the *causes* – the legacies – are so widespread that we *must* also address them. If we do not do this, we will never be able to organise sufficient resources for prevention, peacekeeping, humanitarian relief, and peace-restoring in the coming truly massive unrest and upheaval that the policies of Northern elites are making more certain every day. And for this, too, we have got to reform and strengthen the United Nations.

When the Charter was being drafted 49 years ago the then independent smaller and middle countries – including the Netherlands – fought hard to make the UN not merely a ‘peace and order’ body but a world organisation also mandated to tackle *the root economic and social causes of conflict*; as the Charter says, ‘to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples’. The smaller countries insisted that the UN itself must be the commanding centrepiece where macro-monetary, macro-trade and macro-finance policy for ‘all peoples’ would be formulated. The General Assembly was to adopt and coordinate these macro policies, and the Economic and Social Council to co-ordinate their implementation by specialised agencies. These would include an International Monetary Fund as the emergent central bank of the world community, working closely with an International Trade Organisation to intervene equitably against either surplus or deficit countries, and to promote open but *fair* trade. The founders placed such emphasis on keeping this new United Nations System together that they stipulated that the UN and the economic and social agencies should be located together at a single headquarters.

Governments have done some marvellous things at the UN – our 70 Human Rights instruments, for example; but the wrecking of the originally much stronger architecture is shameful. Not one specialised-agency headquarters has been located at the UN. The United States smashed all hope of an equitable world trade system – the key to advancement of all peoples – by blocking the creation of the International Trade Organisation. All we got instead was the General

Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which should have been called the Specific Agreement to continue the Imperial Trading System. It has never covered trade vital to the poor countries. In the Uruguay Round key Northern countries negotiated virtually among themselves for seven years, then gave the South *one weekend* to consider their draft document. The North-South gap is significantly wider and deeper as a result, and increasing conflict is that much more certain.

The Northern industrial powers have also refused to accept the UN as the centrepiece for any macro-economic policy formation. They insist that monetary and finance policy issues belong in the IMF and the World Bank, which they control and which they then make sure do *not* address such issues. The World Bank deals with debt only on a country-by-country basis. In the twenty years of repeated Northern refusal to take part in serious discussion of a debt strategy in the General Assembly, the indebtedness of the South has increased 14 times, to now some 1.4 trillion dollars. The IMF long ago gave up any pretence of acting as an equitable global agency. Under threat of denying developing countries credit-standing anywhere in the world it imposes its 'structural adjustment' policies on them, and only on them. Mass unrest and conflict have quickly followed in every victim country, most recently in Senegal and Mexico.

Conservative media regularly report that the G-7 deal with the issues of 'the global economy'. This is outright fiction. In their annual summit communiqués 'the global economy' is only the North-North economy – Japan, North America, and Europe. So we have no macro-policies that address the needs of all humankind on an all-win basis; and again, the certainty of conflict increases.

The third key element in the wrecking of the original UN socio-economic design was to divert attention from North-South structural, macro-policy issues with the panacea of development assistance, so-called 'aid'. As this built up, the South tried to maintain a UN programme addressing the structural and policy issues through UNCTAD – *trade* and development; the powers largely ignored UNCTAD and have now eviscerated it. The South tabled all the structural issues together in the Programme of Action for a New International Economic Order; the North ignored it. The South tried to get a strong new UN Director-General for Development and International Economic Co-operation; the Western powers disliked the new post, so the Secretaries-General they had chosen for their timidity kept it hopelessly weak. Mr. Boutros-Ghali has now abolished it.

The arithmetic of the consequences of these policies today provides clear evidence of the scale of conflict yet to come.

Official Northern Development Assistance is running at between 55 and 60 billion dollars a year. Two-thirds of all this so-called ‘aid’ is tied; the receiving country must use that ‘aid’ to buy the expertise or equipment of the ‘donor’ country whether it is suitable or not. Most of the ‘aid’ which so many NGOs spend energy to mobilise and for which so many decent Northern citizens pay taxes thinking they really are ‘giving’, is therefore a 40 billion dollar disguised subsidy of one-way Northern exports to the South, by a sort of compulsory sale.

UNDP calculates that the North’s protectionist barriers against attempted Southern exports to the North, combined with manipulated interest rates and other imposed inequities, are depriving the countries of the South of at least 500 billion dollars that they could be *earning* every year. Thus, Northern refusal to address all-win structural solutions is preventing the South from earning every year nearly ten times all the North’s development ‘aid’ to it. That is simply stupid as well as dangerous.

In 1960 the richest one-fifth of humankind was earning thirty times the income of the poorest one-fifth; the richest one-fifth now earns *sixty* times what the poorest one-fifth of humankind can earn. Some 15 million people die needlessly every year from starvation and malnutrition-associated illness. The number of people barely surviving in absolute poverty has increased by 40 per cent in only the last 15 years, to some 1.4 billion. The present policies of the Northern powers guarantee that *soon, 1 in every 3 human beings alive on this planet will be only existing on the very margins of daily survival*. When such conditions existed in Europe there was bloody revolution, and masses of the poor marched on the centres of wealth and exploitation.

And there are yet more roots of conflict. The imperial powers kept most of humankind in the straitjacket of colonialism during which no endogenous evolution of political institutions comparable with what was happening in the North was possible. They then imposed their centralist nation-state structure on those totally different cultures. Moreover, this model was imposed within frontiers which themselves were imposed by the powers without any consultation with people on either side of them. Virtually every frontier in the South is artificial, divisive, explosive. And having put most of humankind in these triple-layered straitjackets, within a few years of abandoning their direct imperialism the Northern powers installed, financed and armed almost every one of the dictatorships of the last three decades.

Thus, most of the South has emerged from the Cold War economically prostrated, politically ravaged, filled with long-suppressed movements of aspiration and anger and the abandoned weaponry of an alien North-North ideological contest gratuitously thrust into their lands. The South is thus the arena of political and economic policies dictated by the North that are prescriptions for mass unrest, the rise of so-called fundamentalist movements, and more and more open conflict. The powers are virtually guaranteeing that these conflicts will coalesce into massive North-South confrontation early in the next century.

With some hesitancy beside so distinguished an expert as Minister Pronk, these are only some of my own recommendations for at last tackling the full spectrum of such conflict.

We must demand that the mandates in the Charter to make the UN the centrepiece for genuinely global, all-win macro policies are now implemented before the world divides irrevocably and violently. NGOs in each country should form a national consortium to work, each according to its special field, along the whole conflict-spectrum (trade, food, environment, peace and disarmament, human rights, humanitarian relief, and so on). Each group would then bring its reports and proposals to a national council of the consortium whose purpose should be to carry out multi-disciplinary monitoring and lobbying for key policies and reforms.

To gear up the UN for its originally intended role the top of the Secretariat must be re-organised, with Deputy Secretaries-General, of rank higher than any other executive head in the System. One should be for International Economic Co-operation and Sustainable Development, to help the Secretary-General co-ordinate and to assemble coherent macro-economic policy proposals to present to governments.

NGOs should challenge each government to explain how the Bretton Woods institutions have handled global macro-monetary and finance issues. The governance of the IMF must be overhauled: an agency 74 per cent of whose membership has only 34 per cent voting power has no place in the United Nations System. NGOs should also urge members of parliament to demand an accounting by government of the gross inconsistencies between their policies in the UN development system and those the same governments endorse at the IMF. These inconsistencies include funding UN programmes (and bilateral projects) to help build up education and health services in developing countries, but endorsing IMF 'conditionalities' requiring the same countries to tear down the very same services by as much as 35 per cent.

The work of the International Coalition for Development Action (ICDA) in monitoring trade issues should be supported and built upon by NGOs, towards an all-out campaign to expose the ‘free-trade’ sham of the GATT and to get a proper, genuinely global organisation for fair trade. NGOs have a tremendously important job to do to explain to Northern citizens that no amount of ‘aid’ will enable three-quarters of humankind to earn their way in a world dominated by a rigged trading regime, and that this is ultimately against the North’s own interests.

To address the ethnic and cultural causes of conflict I believe we need a new UN body, converting the now scarcely used Trusteeship Council into the UN Council on Culture, Representation, and Governance. This should be a quite different type of UN organ: not trying to fashion universal policy, but serving as the world’s open think-tank on the enormous problems of the obsolescent nation-state, and the aspirations of hundreds of millions for greater expression of their ancestral identity but not necessarily in traditionally conceived nation-state sovereignty. In this regard it is worth recalling that 1 in every 18 of us on this planet is a member of an indigenous people. This Council should command the respect and draw upon the knowledge and insights of social scientists from throughout the world. Traditionally trained diplomats openly admit that they are not equipped to deal with this range of problems. We need, not so much more preventive diplomacy as a new preventive sociology.

Moving along the spectrum, the relevant NGOs in the consortia I have suggested should seek the co-operation of specialists in their countries to support and network with social and political scientists in conflict-prone countries as agents both of conflict-prevention and source of early warning. Peace NGOs should become really expert in the entire spectrum of United Nations peaceful settlement processes and instruments, like the 1991 General Assembly Declaration on Fact-Finding Missions. Above all, they should insist that the Security Council return to the Charter, which clearly instructs the Council that it should *begin with and work through Chapter VI*, in Peaceful Settlement, and turn to Chapter VII, enforcement, only in last resort.

For humanitarian assistance we must now insist that governments consolidate the jungle of UN-System agencies they have proliferated. The World Food Programme’s emergency food aid work and first-class staff, and the relief capacities and functions of UNICEF and UNHCR must be consolidated in a single UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs also headed by a Deputy Secretary-General. Humanitarian operations should have their own United Nations Humanitarian Security Police,

especially trained women and men who should be separate from any peacekeeping forces and, I am convinced, would often be able to avert the need for them.

NGOs must, however, also be far more alert to challenge the behaviour of tired elites that are still trying to strut the world stage while piling up explosives under it. In 1945 the smaller countries did not foresee the use of state bribery and state terrorism to get the votes for, or silence opposition to, whatever move the powers want to make using the name of the UN. So the Charter is silent about such behaviour. Yes, I did say ‘state terrorism’. When any government threatens a country already deeply impoverished with loss of aid, or no debt relief, or no loan from the World Bank or no credits from the IMF unless it votes or speaks in the UN the way that government demands, then as brutally as by fleets of bombers it does threaten the very lives of millions who are already barely surviving; and that is a form of state terrorism.

The NGOs of Europe in particular must insist that their governments cease to be so acquiescent in this flagrantly undemocratic behaviour of powers that claim to be the exemplars of democracy. NGOs should organise a ‘Blackmail Watch’ at the UN to expose every instance of bribery and economic threat. Unlike the beaten-down and blackmailed South, Europe has nothing to lose but its shame in staying silent about such behaviour.

I have given you a grim picture because unless we know what we are up against we will get nowhere. But I remain very hopeful. Why? First, simply because the South has not yet given up the UN. The Southern three-quarters of all of us on this planet, despite all their agonies, do care about our one universal public-service institution. The UN’s problems lie overwhelmingly among the other quarter of us, who have not cared enough to oppose the wrecking behaviour of the powers, and have only recently suddenly realised that the UN might just be very important.

Secondly I have hope because, just possibly, and if now pushed, the powers may abandon their arrogant pretensions. Once again they cannot agree among themselves, and we are seeing real evidence that they have too many problems at home to have the energy for, and do not want to spend the money to be, the ‘policemen of the world’. In my view that is all to the good. We need the powers as partners of size and no more than that; we must ensure that the membership of the UN as a whole contributes the resources in funds, personnel of all

needed kinds, and especially logistics, to mount conflict-preventing or -halting operations. The funds exist, in defence budgets.

But thirdly I have hope because of the tremendous new surge of concern by NGOs and citizens, to see a reformed and strengthened United Nations for its next fifty years. We must demand that our governments do a far better job in their selection, *on our behalf*, of the leadership of the United Nations; and it is time that they find us a woman Secretary-General of outstanding calibre, for a salutary change. We need a strong surge of demand next year for the first steps towards a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly, to give new and real meaning to the fact that the Charter's opening words are, 'We, the Peoples of the United Nations'.

It was never safe, and it is not now safe, to leave solely to governments the world's first universal social contract, which explicitly called for tackling the root causes of conflict – for (and I am quoting Article 55 of *our* Charter) 'the creation of conditions of stability and well-being which are necessary for peaceful and friendly relations among nations based upon respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples'.

We have left the assumption of our right and responsibility in this, as the peoples of the United Nations, dangerously late. Let us get on with it – at and after conferences like this one. Our children and their children will not forgive us if we leave them a world in the flames of multiple conflicts, a world at the same time in massive, apocalyptic confrontation between North and South; the most shameful bequest we could make to our children: a world we would not ourselves wish to live in.



Commentary by Jan Pronk

Erskine Childers delivered this speech in 1994, in The Hague, to a conference of non-governmental organisations. At that time he had given many speeches on the role and position of the United Nations in different areas of world governance. It was a new era in the 20th century, five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, with new opportunities opening up for countries to meet global challenges.

Until 1989, countries had been politically and economically constrained by the Cold War. It had been politically difficult to define common interests and to endeavour to bring about changes, because these might be perceived as threatening the status quo with regard to international spheres of influence. As a result, the big powers of East and West consistently resisted such changes. This situation also constrained the possibilities to reform North-South relations. Economic, social, cultural, religious and political conflicts between groups within countries had been frozen or suppressed, because they would endanger the status quo. Economically it was difficult to meet new global challenges, because many of the financial resources in the richer world were spent on an ever-increasing arms race.

By the 1990s, these considerations no longer constrained international options. Now there were possibilities to find ways and means to bridge the North-South divide, to lift poor people out of deprivation, to preserve the world's natural environment and ecology and to mitigate climate change. In 1992, this led to the adoption of Agenda 2000 by world leaders convened at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. This action implied a commitment to change and to setting new priorities in global governance.

However, a few years later this new spirit had dimmed. The prospects for sustainable peace, development and action on the environment were no longer as bright. Political optimism was fading, and economic dualism increased: while a large part of the world's population, in particular in the North, did indeed benefit from renewed economic growth and technological breakthroughs, many others were left aside. The divide between rich and poor grew wider, not narrower. The UN was as ineffective as before, despite the multiplication of meetings, conferences, reports and reviews.

It was during this period that Erskine Childers addressed many audiences around the world on issues of world governance. In all his

speeches he confessed himself a staunch defender of the values that half a century earlier had been enshrined in international law and had led to the establishment of the UN. Among those speeches, his Hague address on ‘The United Nations in a World of Conflict’ stands out for its comprehensiveness and firmness.

That address delivered more than 15 years ago is still pertinent, and is so for seven reasons.

First, in this speech Childers takes us back to the very roots of the UN system. These tend to be forgotten. The first meeting of the General Assembly of the UN took place many years ago (in 1946) and the world has since changed. People are inclined to read the principles and mandate of the UN in light of present practices. However, as Childers tirelessly argued on many occasions (Childers 1992), the founding fathers of the UN system had something else in mind. The system was established to maintain international peace and security, not only through peacekeeping operations and through political talks, but also by addressing the root causes of conflict. This would entail promoting higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development and addressing international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character. In order to do this effectively, the UN would have to be able to play a central role in international social and economic affairs. In the reports of the UN Conference on International Organisation (San Francisco, 1945) and of the preparatory commission of the UN, these affairs were defined as including international trade, finance, communications and transport, economic reconstruction, prevention of economic instability, economic development of underdeveloped areas, access to raw materials and capital goods and also health. In these reports, the founders defined a commanding role for the General Assembly, the Secretary-General and the Economic and Social Council in coordinating the policies and practices of the Bretton Woods institutions and the specialised agencies (UN 1945).

Second, in his Hague speech Childers presented a persuasive and convincing argument in favour of an integrated global approach to the challenges that were then threatening the countries and peoples of the world. The reasoning of the founding fathers of the UN implied that this system should become the commanding centrepiece in the formulation of macroeconomic, macro-trade and macro-financial policies for all peoples. In another address delivered three years earlier (Childers 1991), Childers quoted Aneurin Bevan, who in 1952 had argued that ‘the division of labour into which man is born weaves his own life into a series of interdependencies involving not only his own personal surroundings, but moving in ever-widening circles

until they encompass most parts of the earth.’ In Bevan’s view, the modern world was:

...no longer a multiplication of a number of simple self-sufficient social groupings, each able to detach itself without damage to itself..., so that the separation is now a mutilation. It is similar to a physical organism but with this difference: that it has no head, and therefore no mechanism with which to receive and co-ordinate its vibrations. (Bevan 1952: 49)

Bevan here presented an enlightening perspective on the character of globalisation, which after the Second World War had been given new impetus. If the vibrations at the global level were not guided by reason, they might plague the world.

Hypocrisy

The drafters of the UN Charter demonstrated they were aware of this risk. They opted for a system that could ensure reason in combination with ethics. However, world leaders soon renounced the principles and rules they had endorsed. This is the third theme of Childers’s speech. In words that cannot be misunderstood, he chastises the powers from the North for their hypocrisy. In another of his speeches from this period, Childers reprimands them because they ‘refused to discuss any macro-economic policy formulation in UN organs on the totally false claim that such policy issues belong in the Bretton Woods institutions – which they then make sure do not discuss them’ (Childers 1994a). The World Bank, IMF and GATT were indeed allowed to drift far from what had been concluded in San Francisco and even to abandon any pretence of acting as equitable global agencies. These specialised agencies were allowed to withdraw from any meaningful central coordination. Developing countries were confronted with uncoordinated and counterproductive international policies. The imposition of structural adjustment measures undermined development investments in education, health and agriculture. Trade protectionism by Northern countries, together with low and fluctuating commodity prices, volatile interest rates and mounting debts nullified the macroeconomic effects of development aid. Far from decreasing, poverty and inequality grew.

The countries that established the UN system have clearly been shying away from the consequences of their own bold initiative. In various speeches, Childers supposed that this unprincipled attitude arose from the fact that these countries had not expected decolonisation to take place so fast. Decolonisation resulted in a large number of newly independent nation states, all of whom applied for membership of the UN.

According to Childers, the inaugural members refused to grant to new members the rights they had created for themselves. In formal terms this had to be done, because of the one-country one-vote principle, but in reality such measures do not mean much if major decisions are being taken elsewhere. Decolonisation was indeed one of the first and major successes of the UN system. With the benefit of hindsight, this could have been expected from the very outset. Be that as it may, the founding members were clearly afraid of being outvoted by a large majority of Southern countries, their former colonies.

Are Northern powers the only ones to blame? In neither of the two addresses mentioned above did Childers discuss at length the wrongdoings of regimes in developing countries. He refers to corruption, mismanagement and defaults, but does not dwell on them. Childers shows himself to be a *Tiers Mondiste*. He argues that the peoples of the South, having long suffered oppression through colonisation, have the right to make their own mistakes. This is Childers's fourth general theme: though developing countries are independent and sovereign and responsible for the quality of the governance in their nations, the Northern former colonial powers still bear a historic responsibility. The argument is quite convincing. Until recently, as Childers argues,

...the entire Southern majority of humankind was held in intellectual and institutional stasis – in suspended animation – by Northern colonial empires. For [centuries] the South was not allowed to evolve its own institutions of governance, administration, and public accountability, or to develop science and technology and advance its economies, or to develop the very education of citizens. The proposition that societies only even legally allowed to begin to try to resume their own indigenous evolution some...decades ago bear no continuous wounds from the previous centuries is...insupportable. (Childers 1994a: 2-3)

Right over might

As a matter of fact, this would reinforce the developing countries' claim to justice within the new international legal order established after 1945. To reinforce their claim, they could quote the leader of one of the then big powers, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, in the first-ever speech made in a UN Assembly: 'Let us be clear what is our ultimate aim. It is not just the negation of war, but the creation of a world of security and freedom, of a world which is governed by justice and moral law. We desire to assert the pre-eminence of right over might and the general good against selfish and sectional aims' (quoted in Childers 1991).

Right over might it had to be. If not, both international justice and international security would be at risk. This is Erskine's fifth theme. In his addresses at the beginning of the 1990s he issued clear warnings about the possible consequences for peace and security of injustice and neglect. In his statements, he went beyond the prediction that greater poverty would lead to more violence. Such an analysis would have been too simple. According to Childers, there is more than poverty:

Most of the South has emerged from the Cold War economically prostrated, politically ravaged, filled with long-suppressed movements of aspiration and anger and the abandoned weaponry of an alien North-North ideological contest gratuitously thrust into their lands. The South is thus the arena of political and economic policies dictated by the North that are prescriptions for mass unrest, the rise of so-called fundamentalist movements and more and more open conflict. The powers are virtually guaranteeing that these conflicts will coalesce into massive North-South confrontation early in the next century.

This long quote contains thoughts that are also pivotal in Childers's other speeches of the early 1990s. Today we are early into that next century Childers spoke of. He delivered his speech at a time of war in Bosnia, shortly after the tragedy in Somalia, shortly before the genocide in Rwanda. Since then, many 'frozen' conflicts have been unleashed, wars have been fought and people killed in Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, Congo, Gaza, Liberia, to name just a few. They could not be contained, because, as Childers foresaw in his speech in Geneva delivered half a year after his Hague address, 'present structural policies inexorably intensify the causes of conflicts that make more and more likely an apocalyptic convulsion across the North-South divide which neither they nor any imaginable UN peacekeeping capacity would contain' (Childers 1994a). It should be noted that Childers no longer referred to a possible North-South confrontation, but explicitly to a 'convulsion across the North-South divide'. This is exactly what has happened at the turn of the century.

North-South stands for a divide between haves and have nots in terms of welfare and power. That divide has economic, social, cultural and political dimensions, which reinforce each other. The possible consequences of the widening of these gaps, as foreseen by Childers, have become the grim realities of today or have come close to realisation. Presently the situation is even grimmer. Witness, for instance, climate change, more rapid than envisaged at that time. Witness the global financial crisis due to the 'vibrations' orchestrated by transnational banks and not constrained by rational, reasonable and responsible action – in Bevan's terms, a 'head'. Witness the weakening of many nation states,

many fragile, some failing or even breaking down. Witness also threats to security from international terrorism, the general recourse to defending national interests through so-called pre-emptive strikes and the resulting violations of human security, human rights and democracy.

These developments were foreseen not only by Erskine Childers. Others – intellectuals, civil servants, politicians and citizens – spoke along similar lines. Erskine Childers, however, did not confine himself to criticising prevailing policies and practices, issuing warnings or preaching doom, he also made a number of concrete proposals for UN reform. He did so on many occasions, and I consider this – the sixth theme in his speech in The Hague – one of his strengths. Childers always came forward with constructive ideas. They were not dreams, but options for change within reach, both desirable and feasible. The general principles underlying the proposed reforms were that the institutions had to be truly global, equally representative, fully integrating all dimensions of development and conflict and that they should have authority, in other words become some form of democratic central power at the international level. I will not repeat the proposals made by Childers in this and other addresses. They can be studied together with proposals made elsewhere, for instance in the *Report Our Global Neighbourhood* by the Commission of Global Governance (Carlsson and Ramphal 1995) and *Renewing the United Nations System* (Childers and Urquhart 1994). Not all these proposals have been rejected or neglected and a few have been brought to some form of implementation. Currently, an ongoing debate on UN reform continues. However, reform has always been marginal and piecemeal, never substantial, leaving the central powers unchallenged. The present discussion within the UN does not offer much prospect of anything different.

Childers does not blame the UN itself for this. He has made it clear that the UN administration is at the mercy of governments. For this reason, he recommended against devoting much time to amending the UN Charter. Such an enterprise might even be counterproductive, because it could strengthen the hand of those governments aiming to further weaken Attlee's principle of 'right over might' (Childers 1991). Instead, he pleaded for the mobilisation of world public opinion in order 'to use every possible comparative advantage of the system as it is' (Childers 1991). So, use what is available, fight for this and confront the powers that try to conceal their actions in violation of once-agreed principles.

Hope

Will such mobilisation be successful? Here we come to the seventh element in Childers's Hague speech. The speaker, addressing an audi-

ence of young citizens rather than experienced bureaucrats and politicians, not only offered theoretical alternatives but also made clear that these alternatives had a chance to be turned into reality. It was a heartening message of hope.

Childers gave three reasons for being hopeful. Despite everything, the South had not yet given up on the UN. Moreover, Northern powers had to confront so many problems at home they would have fewer resources to rule the world by themselves without regard for their partners in the South. And, finally, the world's public, growing increasingly concerned about global problems, might become involved in a surge for responsible leadership by an effective and truly representative UN.

More than 15 years have passed and the world has changed a great deal since Erskine Childers delivered his speeches. It is too early to conclude that the three reasons for hope have faded. However, in the North and in the South choices are being made that are different from what he hoped for or expected. The US has spent huge resources on invading Iraq, waging a war in Afghanistan and fighting international terrorism. Other powers in the current multi-polar world support or, at least, allow these endeavours to dominate world affairs, without any meaningful UN involvement. In the South, many no longer believe the UN can play an effective non-partisan role. Many governments and people see the UN as a Western construction. Moreover, today the South is even less a common entity than it was shortly after decolonisation. At that time, resource-rich countries and emerging economies in the South attempted within the UN to define common positions together with the poor and economically less developed countries. Together they saw themselves as the so-called Third World. Since the end of the Cold War, there is no longer any reason to define common positions and join forces. Increasingly, the larger and stronger Southern countries such as Brazil, China, India and South Africa work together with Russia in the BRICS coalition to negotiate with the bigger and more powerful Northern counterparts outside the framework of the UN. The G20 and special so-called 'Coalitions of the Willing' talk and work on economic, financial, political and environmental issues, without involving the smaller, weaker and poorer countries of the world. The interests of the latter hardly feature in frameworks that are self-elective and self-contained. The UN is a principled system, values-based, rules-based and rooted in international law. These principles and values, the procedures of decision-making and the rules of implementation are the result of consensus. All these considerations can be arbitrarily laid aside in the new gatherings where so-called global deals are made. Peoples and nations excluded from the deals have no right of appeal.

There is no Third World anymore in terms of a clearly defined group of nations. The concept of North–South has also lost its meaning as a distinction between two groups of countries. The present North–South divide is not between nations, but between classes. Globalisation has resulted in a convergence of economic interests of the upper and middle classes in all countries, North and South, East and West. This may help us to avoid new international wars, until countries become involved in a scramble for scarce resources. However, in all countries the middle and upper classes strive for greater economic welfare by neglecting, exploiting and excluding people who are poor, weak and voiceless, and do not have adequate access to land, water, energy, capital, credit, technology, education, health, public services – in short, the means necessary to improve their own lot and to benefit from economic growth in general. Indeed, the present North–South can be observed within all the countries of the world, leading to a global North–South divide that no longer follows national frontiers.

In his speeches and writing, Erskine Childers dealt in particular with discord between nation states. However, as noted above, he also referred to more complex conflicts, including reverse aspirations within countries, which could lead to an ‘apocalyptic convulsion across the North–South divide’. In the last 20 years, economic and political conflicts within countries have become ever sharper, more complicated and less manageable because of cultural, religious and ethnic divisions. The escalation of such conflicts, and the resulting violence, has spread across national frontiers and sometimes taken on global proportions. So far, the UN’s capacity to deal with these increasingly complicated conflicts has not kept pace with events. Root causes are hardly addressed. Governments of individual nation states, to guard their national security, increasingly look to their military, police, special forces, intelligence and secret services, rather than seeking political solutions within the framework of values-based international consultations and negotiations.

So, Childers’s first two reasons for hope for a better UN have become even more fragile than they were 20 years ago. However, the very international developments that have nearly made these hopes illusory provide strong reason to revitalise the UN. Violations of peace, threats to security and challenges to sustainability demand a greater capacity in international society to address the root causes of these dangers. Will new generations be aware of these risks and of the need to address them in a rights-based and equitable way? Childers’s third reason to be hopeful did not lie with states, governments and regimes, but with peoples. An increased public awareness and concern about global problems might mobilise people in favour of UN global leader-

ship. Such awareness and concern has indeed increased, for instance, with regard to terrorism or climate change. This, however, has not yet led to a broad popular movement in favour of equitable provisions to meet the needs of all the peoples of the world and create a sustainable future for all of humankind. Concern and fear seem to foster self-centredness and the apportionment of blame on other people of different backgrounds, cultures and beliefs.

However, Childers was right to base his hope on people rather than regimes. Perhaps this is even truer now than 20 years ago. The broadening and deepening of globalisation after the end of the Cold War has resulted in rapid and widely shared technological progress and in unprecedented opportunities for people all over the world to gain access to information and to communicate with one another. At the beginning of this new century, generations of young people are using these opportunities freely and intensively. They do not easily accept the suppression of information and ideas by authorities, governments and other powers. They know how to get around restrictions on information and freedom of opinion and expression. The audience of Erskine Childers's speeches 15 or so years ago did not have such opportunities to the extent that people do today. Nowadays, many young people in countries all around the world communicate with each other in unprecedented ways. They are less prejudiced than their predecessors, have more in common, and share information, ideas, expectations and hopes.

So, Erskine Childers's three reasons for hope can be turned into a threefold appeal: believe in the opportunities that present themselves, get mobilised and confront selfish powers. That is what the founding fathers of the UN had in mind. It is still worth a try.

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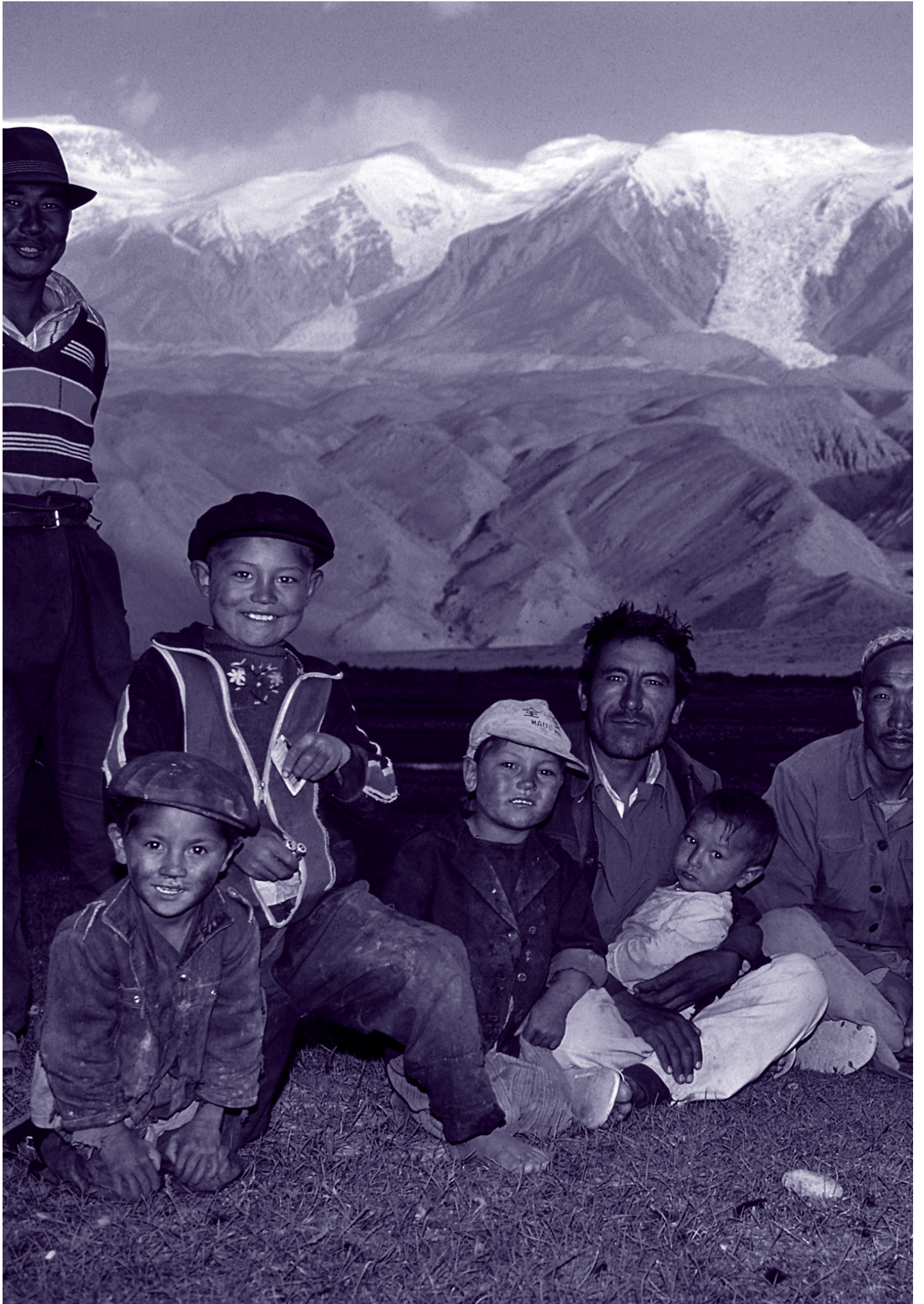
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Far too serious a matter to be left to governments

Time to assert Citizens' Rights in the UN

Erskine Childers



Original text sent to 'Development' journal
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Printed in an abridged version

*'Everything will be all right when people
stop seeing the United Nations as a weird
Picasso drawing, and see it as a drawing
they made themselves.'*

Dag Hammarskjöld

If, thirty-five years ago, Secretary-General Hammarskjöld felt that people found it difficult to see the UN clearly, and to see themselves involved in it, what would he say today? This year the drawing is festooned with jubilee decorations, but under these ephemera it is if anything more bizarre, daubed in even heavier contradictions.

The basic contradiction, of course, concerns the numerous, first-ever strides the UN has in fact made despite the attacks on it. Some quick examples:

- The General Assembly has been scorned by Northern democrats (of all people) as 'a useless talking shop' ever since it achieved virtually universal membership; but its 'irresponsible majority' has by now created humanity's first-ever magna carta, comprising some 70 legal instruments of human rights¹.
- The UN's founders did not predict decolonisation even within this century: they directed the architects of the new Seat at New York to allow for a possible maximum of some 70 member-states. The buildings with these essentially North-centred space assumptions were

¹ cf., ia, *Human Rights - A Compilation of International Instruments*, United Nations, recurrently up-dated.