

United Nations in Focus: Number 3
23 December 2009

Year in Review 2009

The United Nations takes on a range of tough global challenges

2009 was the year in which the world absorbed the full impact of the worst global economic setback since the Great Depression, was startled by the arrival of a novel influenza virus that quickly reached pandemic scale, and was shocked by a crisis in Gaza, which dealt another setback to prospects for peace in the Middle East. It also witnessed the most tangible evidence yet that a changing climate is refashioning the face of the planet.

But with the end of 2009 only days away, and at the conclusion of a grueling conference on climate change in Copenhagen, the outlines of a global deal emerged. Breaking a virtual deadlock that had prevailed for years, the Copenhagen Accord – in the words of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon – “marks a significant step forward in negotiations for the first truly global agreement that can limit and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, support adaptation for the most vulnerable and help to establish a new era of environmentally sustainable growth.”

The meeting of some 120 Heads of State and Government led to agreement that climate change adaptation projects and prevention of deforestation and forest degradation will be supported through ramped-up funding: \$30 billion for immediate implementation over the next three years, and \$100 billion a year by 2020. The funding would go through a newly established Copenhagen Green Climate Fund. Many developing countries, including Brazil, China, India and South Africa, have adopted new climate strategies with proposed emission reductions, and the accord would provide a way to record those efforts. And for the first time, countries agreed to limit global temperature rise to below 2°C.

While falling short of a new, binding international convention, the historic meeting responded to the challenge the UN Secretary-General set when he hosted a climate change summit in New York in September. It also sets the stage for further negotiations toward binding international agreement in Mexico in 2010.

Protecting the poor, moving toward economic recovery

The year started off with the devastating economic downturn gathering force and continued turmoil in financial sectors, especially in the developed world. In contrast to the beggar-thy-neighbour policies that followed the crash of 1929, however, the global community responded swiftly and with an unprecedented level of cooperation:

- The UN Secretary-General was among the first to advocate behind closed doors for a massive effort to re-start economic growth and avert deeper economic damage and impoverishment. The G20 – itself a hastily contrived response to the crisis – agreed to a package of \$1.1 trillion at its London meeting in April.

- Under the pressure of crisis, reform measures advocated by the UN began falling into place. Developing economies received incrementally larger voting rights within the Bretton Woods Institutions. A new allocation of \$250 billion in “Special Drawing Rights” provides a tentative first step toward global capacity to move away from reliance on a single national currency for settling debts and holding reserves, toward a more stable global basket.
- A feared pullback of **official development assistance** (ODA) did not materialize. Although still short of the targets agreed at the 2005 Gleneagles G8 meeting, aid rose to an all-time high in 2008. Backed by the Secretary-General’s assertion that the poor must be protected during the crisis and by concerns that progress towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals would be reversed, projections indicate that ODA will increase further in 2009-2010.
- Secretary-General Ban led the UN’s continued focus on the plight of the poor in launching a new **Global Impact and Vulnerability Alert System** to provide real-time data on how the most vulnerable are affected by economic crisis, and called for a summit in September 2010 to review progress and gaps in attaining the MDGs.

A particularly painful result of reduced purchasing power in the wake of the economic crisis has been the resurgence in malnourishment. After years of steady decrease, the number of hungry in the world rose in 2008 and again in 2009, to exceed one billion. In this regard, the Secretary-General’s creation in 2008 of an **anti-hunger task force** has proven prescient.

The High-Level Task Force is working with Governments, business and civil society in food-deficit poor countries to shore up their agricultural base. Taking advantage of the multifaceted resources of UN member agencies, it supports small-scale farmers who the Secretary-General calls “the heart and soul of food security and poverty reduction.” Liaising with donor countries, the Task Force obtained commitments in 2009 to double the amount of aid devoted to agriculture.

Facing the wildfire spread of the H1N1 influenza virus, the world benefited from spadework already carried out in response to the avian influenza (H5N1) threat. Protocols and practice exercises developed in countries around the world under the guidance of the Secretary-General’s **UN System Influenza Coordinator** helped to manage the crisis, and a decisive World Health Organization response helped to calm nervous publics around the world.

The Secretary-General and the WHO Director-General issued calls for global solidarity in the face of the pandemic, and successfully negotiated for pharmaceutical companies to donate 10 per cent of their H1N1 vaccine production to the 90 countries judged the most vulnerable to pandemic influenza. While the doses that are being contributed will cover only two per cent of the population of these countries, experts judge it sufficient to vaccinate key groups such as pregnant women and medical workers.

Making women safer

Reflecting the priority placed by Secretary-General Ban on ending violence against women and girls, the UN strengthened its work on **violence against women** in 2009, under the

umbrella of the Secretary-General's UNiTE to End Violence against Women campaign. As part of the growing effort to include men as part of the solution, the Secretary-General launched his Network of Men Leaders in November to inspire men and boys everywhere to speak out against violence. His visit to the HEAL Africa Hospital for victims of sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo brought attention to the use of rape as a tactic of war. In September, the Security Council adopted landmark resolution 1888 on women and peace and security, demanding that all parties to armed conflict take immediate action to protect civilians, including women and children, from all forms of sexual violence. Reflecting a recommendation of the Secretary-General, the Council also requested that he appoint a Special Representative to address the crime of **sexual violence in conflict**. The new office will be established in 2010.

A new gender architecture

In late 2009, the General Assembly took a major step towards addressing the fragmentation of the Organization's work on women's issues, when Member States voted to approve a new gender architecture for the UN system. As a result, four currently separate offices will be merged: the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI); the Division for the Advancement of Women in the Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DAW/DESA); the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM); and the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW).

Intensive work is currently under way to develop a proposal for an authoritative entity that will be comparable to other major UN funds and programmes, and which will be equipped to tackle women's issues head-on through effective programmes. In the coming year, Secretary-General Ban is expected to appoint an Under-Secretary-General to head the new entity and lead the UN's efforts in this field.

Peace and security

UN peacekeeping saw the largest deployment of peacekeepers on the ground ever in 2009, with some 115,000 deployed in 17 peace operations. Faced with overstretch and other challenges, the Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support embarked on a major dialogue with their peacekeeping partners - the Security Council, troop and finance-contributing countries and within the Secretariat itself - on what the new generation of peacekeeping should look like, in the "**New Horizon**" project.

On the ground, peacekeeping faced major challenges in the eastern **Democratic Republic of the Congo**. Government armed forces - which the peacekeeping mission was mandated to support - reportedly engaged in attacks on civilians. In addition to protecting civilians, the mission was charged with consolidating and supporting the government army, the FARDC. On a more positive note, some degree of "protection of civilians" was achieved on the ground in **Haiti**, in large part because MINUSTAH peacekeepers took on urban gangs. Moving forward, the Secretary-General appointed former US President Bill Clinton to take the lead on the next step - jobs and development.

The African Union - United Nations Hybrid Operation in **Darfur** continued to grow in numbers and effectiveness throughout 2009. By December, UNAMID had nearly 15,000 troops and 4,600 police on the ground, reaching 75 per cent of its authorized strength.

Despite the positive impact of the peacekeepers, however, parties to the conflict have failed to commit to a comprehensive negotiated settlement to the crisis.

In other key developments:

- The Secretary-General used several opportunities during the year to put **nuclear disarmament** and non-proliferation back on the international agenda, reiterating his five-point plan to “drop the bomb,” as he termed it. He opened the annual Conference on Disarmament in Geneva in May, helping to break a 10-year deadlock over its programme of work. Meanwhile, United States President Obama and Russian Federation President Medvedev announced commitments to begin reducing their sizable nuclear arsenals. The culmination of the year for nuclear disarmament came with the first Security Council meeting on the issue in September.
- Responding to the crisis in **Gaza**, the Secretary-General launched a \$613 million appeal to help provide water, sanitation, health care and food for the following six to nine months. He continued during the year to call upon the Government of Israel to allow unimpeded access for humanitarian aid and goods needed for reconstruction and to immediately address the water, sanitation and environmental crisis in Gaza.
- The **Goldstone Commission**, appointed by the UN Human Rights Council, presented its 500-page report on human rights violations during the Gaza conflict to the General Assembly in October. The Assembly voted to adopt a non-binding resolution calling for Israelis and Palestinians to undertake credible, independent investigations of alleged war crimes committed during the Gaza conflict last December and January.
- Throughout the year, the Secretary-General remained actively engaged on **Myanmar**, including efforts to attain the release of Nobel laureate and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners, and to call for legitimate elections.
- The Secretary-General also visited **Sri Lanka** in May to press for better treatment of hundreds of thousands of IDPs from the rebel-held areas, who remained in camps after the government’s rout of the Tamil Tiger rebels after a 25-year conflict. In November, he was able to welcome Sri Lanka's decision to grant more freedom of movement to internally displaced persons (IDPs) and to release more than half of the IDPs from the camps.

Tragically, the year included **deadly assaults on UN personnel**. Shortly after five World Food Programme employees died in a suicide bomber attack in October in Islamabad, Pakistan, an assault on a UN guest house in Kabul, Afghanistan, killed another five UN staff. These were among the hardest news items to bear in a year that included many difficult challenges, but also resilient and determined responses on the part of the United Nations and the world community.
