

A new, useful life for the UN

“Dear Uncle Sam, This is your final notice. Pay up or else. Sincerely, the United Nations.”

That, in slightly more diplomatic language, has been the UN's latest message to Washington. After decades of being the UN's largest financial supporter, the U.S. is now its biggest deadbeat. Uncle Sam owes a whopping \$560.4 million in back dues.

UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar made a point this week demanding that Washington ante up. His timing was just right. After years of doing nothing, the much reviled UN has sprung dramatically to life.

UN teams are monitoring the Soviet pullout from Afghanistan. UN troops will police the Iran-Iraq ceasefire. Other UN teams may supervise upcoming elections in Namibia. The UN is suddenly very busy trying to manage the peace epidemic that seems to be breaking out all over.

Doing so will cost lots of money, so the UN not only has to go out and collect overdue accounts but dun its members for more contributions.

Why won't Washington pay its bills — particularly for such a good cause?

For two main reasons. First, conservatives in the Reagan administration get high blood pressure at the mere mention of the UN. For them, it is a hotbed of Russki spies and pro-communist, ingrate Third Worlders who do nothing but slander the U.S. and its pals.

Second, and far more important, Congress has been on the warpath against the UN. Great blasts of criticism have been levelled at the UN for its mammoth waste, pointless projects, lavish lifestyle and, until lately, lack of any accomplishments. Much of this has been justified.



Eric MARGOLIS in New York

The UN has become a gold-plated sinecure for all sorts of high-living Third World grandees.

Few things, in fact, gail me more than seeing African UN diplomats whizzing off to super-expensive restaurants in their stretch limos while people in their wretched nations starve. Or seeing the mountains of useless reports on unimaginable trivia that pour out of the UN like a white flood. Or listening to endless speeches scourging South Africa, Israel and Chile from nations whose own hands drip with blood.

In fact, it was constant attacks on Israel that turned Congress against the UN. Back in the early 1960s, the U.S. ran the UN. But as many new nations became members, the U.S. lost its control and often found itself in a minority on key issues. Criticism of Israel has mounted steadily, reflecting growing international disapproval of its policies. Some of this criticism is justified; much is not when compared with outrages in other nations that go unmentioned. Israel's powerful U.S. lobby turned its guns on the UN and got Congress to begin harassing the UN in a variety of ways.

When the UN voted to equate racism with Zionism, a view widely held abroad, Israel's backers erupted in fury at what they saw as raw anti-Semitism. Congress began cutting off funds or delaying payments to the UN. Hence the present problem.

Many of America's western allies also reduced payments, both to the UN and to its agency, UNESCO, in retaliation for their incessant and unbalanced criticism of the West. Enough hot air, they said.

But it is now becoming clear that the UN, for all its many faults, does have a useful and important role to play. In fact, the UN is rather like a peacetime army: Fat, lazy, bureaucratic and comical. And a waste of money. Yet, like an army, everything changes when war breaks out. Suddenly, it all makes sense. So too for the UN which is of little value until there is a peace to be made.

The UN allows warring sides to make face-saving ceasefires and peace agreements. It facilitates troop withdrawals and transfers of territory without bringing shame or political disaster on governments who do these things. Think of the UN as sort of political make-up for red-faced leaders who have gotten their countries into frightful jams. What's needed now is an even stronger UN peacekeeping capability, backed up with more troops — including Canadian soldiers, if there are any left.

At the same time, western nations should keep pressure on the UN to diet hard and take off layers of fat. The UN is long overdue to trim 25% of its bloated staff and a good slice of the operating budget. Delegates should be assessed dues by the word. Maybe that might cut down on windbagery and the paper flood. Let the UN follow the excellent example of the International Red Cross for efficiency and effectiveness.

And grumpy Uncle Sam should be told by his friends, including Canada, to pay up. Who knows, the next people to knock on the UN's door might even be the Israelis and Arabs.