There are two United Nations. One lives largely in New York, Geneva and Vienna. The other is to be found where people are starving, where people are homeless and without a country. This second United Nations is to be found also deep into clearing long-forgotten mine fields as well as in the no-man’s land between warring factions.

These two United Nations could not be more different. One is the home to hundreds of diplomats and visiting politicians. Often they are the ditherers, putting off action today and hoping things will get better by themselves before a crisis worsens in a few days, weeks or months. This first United Nations, the political entity that passes resolutions or doesn’t, has its uses. It allows nation-states, its members, to have their say on the great international problems of the day.

But it is the second, the largely unseen United Nations that rolls up its sleeves to feed the starving, to house the homeless, to care for women and children displaced by war and disease, to be responsible for the 20 million refugees and displaced people in the world, to co-ordinate experts to tackle avian flu or global warming. The UN agencies that carry out this work do it day in, day out, year in, year out - and have to beg for funds at every turn.

Take, for example, the UN’s World Food Program. It is the world's largest humanitarian agency, feeding each year, an average of 90 million poor people to meet their nutritional needs, including 58 million hungry children, in at least 80 of the world's poorest countries.

But this UN agency is not simply a block of administrative offices in Geneva. Its trucks, planes and ships are always on call, not only to the latest disaster where people need to be fed, but constantly trying to avert the slow march of malnutrition where endemic hunger is a daily tragedy.

Quite apart from its major operation in Darfur, the WFP sent out a plea on March 6 that unless it received substantial new contributions for its operation in Mauritania, as many as 68,000 young children menaced by malnutrition will see their rations reduced or cut completely at the most critical time of the year.

Like so many other UN agencies, WFP has to beg for funds. WFP requires an additional US$14.4 million for its Mauritania operation this year and is concerned that funding has largely dried up in recent months, despite the imminent onset of the annual “lean season”, when poor families routinely struggle to find enough to eat.
It is not as if donors were ignoring WFP's three-year relief operation in Mauritania. They include the United States (US$15.2 million), multilateral funds (US$4.2 million), Saudi Arabia (US$2 million), the European Commission (US$1.2 million), Germany (US$967,000), Luxembourg (US$920,000), France (US$750,000), Ireland (US$641,000), the African Development Bank (US$500,000), Venezuela (US$500,000), the United Kingdom (US$466,000), Canada (US$438,000), Spain (US$381,000), New Zealand (US$340,000), Turkey (US$300,000), Italy (US$271,000), the OPEC Fund (US$150,000), Private donors (US$23,000), Israel (US$17,000). The United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund also contributed $596,000.

Japan announced in February a contribution of US$20.8 million to WFP to assist millions of vulnerable and chronically food insecure people in 13 countries spread throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America. Australia is also a regular contributor.

There is no shortage of critics when it comes to the UN. Perhaps taking their line from the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, that multilateralism is the lowest common denominator of international diplomacy, commentators find it easy to criticise the UN - usually from the height of ignorance. Some “discovered” the tragedy of Darfur several years after UN agencies had been fully involved in helping the helpless.

UN member-states twiddled their collective thumbs until recently, while UN agencies had been doing their level best since April 2003 with other inadequately funded non-government organisations to bring relief to the thousands of displaced and persecuted Darfur people.

UN agencies actively engaged in the Darfur crisis were and are: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA); Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; the UN Development Fund; the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF); the World Food Program and the World Health Organisation.

But this is just one tiny example of the reach of the UN. The UN does so many other things to benefit mankind. It facilitates the drafting of multilateral treaties (the UN cannot make treaties itself) on such diverse issues as banning landmines to Law of the Sea; from the Rights of the Child to the treaty that bans - or should - torture.

Through the leadership and front line work of UN workers, the world is close to eradicating polio worldwide. In calling this week for a final effort, Margaret Chan, World Health Organization director general, said that the number of people hit by the paralysing disease has been cut from 350,000 in 1988 to fewer than 2,000 in 2006.

We are used to seeing police at the scene of an accident, fire services at a house fire, or charitable organisations helping out in a crisis. We don't blame the helpers for the situation they are attending. Not so with the UN. All too frequently when states fail or conflict renders a population at risk to UN is called on to pick up the pieces left behind by those who failed their responsibilities. All too often it is the UN that is blamed.

It is only fair to quote Mr Downer’s words at the transfer of the UN Information Centre to Canberra last October. He said, "Power in the United Nations doesn't rest with the UN. The UN is made up of its membership. It's as good or poor as its members are good or poor. It is as united and effective or as divided and ineffective as the member governments want it to be.

“So when people make judgments about the UN they're not really making judgments so much about the institution, but they're making judgments about the governments which make up that institution which determine the decisions its making”.

The reputation of the United Nations, good or bad, is a reflection of ourselves.
About the Author

Ian Mathews AM is contributing editor to UNity, the national publication of the United Nations Association of Australia. He was its editor for 17 years. He was editor and editor in chief of The Canberra Times from 1972-1988.

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