

Washington targets United Nations for destabilisation

By Chris Marsden
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In the aftermath of President George W. Bush's reelection, Washington has stepped up a campaign to discredit and destabilise the United Nations, focusing on accusations of possible wrong doing by Secretary General Kofi Annan.

The accusations relate to the alleged abuse of the UN-administered Oil for Food Programme (OFP), under which trade in Iraqi oil was allowed to bypass the sanctions regime imposed following the first Gulf War in 1990. The programme ran from 1996, with the proviso that monies raised by Iraq were used to fund aid programmes.

The Bush administration and its agencies have levelled charges of corruption surrounding the programme for months. Washington's aim has been to attribute opposition to a military attack on Iraq by the French, German and Russian governments to concern for their commercial relations with the Baathist regime.

In April, Annan had approved an investigation into the allegations. The UN inquiry is led by the former chairman of the Federal Reserve Paul Volcker, helped by Justice Richard Goldstone, the South African judge who prosecuted war crimes in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and by Professor Mark Pieth, a Swiss expert on money-laundering.

Volcker's remit centres on whether UN officials, including Benon V. Sevan, who headed the oil-for-food office, illegally benefited from special oil allotments from Saddam Hussein. Individuals and companies from some 40 countries are accused of colluding in smuggling Iraqi oil through Turkey in a gigantic scam that enabled Saddam Hussein to skim off billions.

Annan has described the allegations as "outrageous and exaggerated".

"We had no mandate to stop oil smuggling," he told a news conference. "The US and the British had planes in the air. We were not there," he told reporters in New York.

The US has never contemplated allowing the UN to preside over an investigation in a way that would close off Washington's ability to capitalise on the issue and has constantly sought to up the ante.

In October the US-led Iraqi Survey Group (ISG) alleged that France and Russia had been aiming to ease sanctions on Iraq in return for oil. The material was immediately published on the CIA's own web site. Significantly, the ISG report came one month after Annan had said the US-led war was illegal—an action that had confirmed him as a hate figure in Republican circles.

Chief US weapons inspector Charles Duelfer said in the ISG report that he had found evidence that Iraqi intelligence under Hussein tried to bribe foreign nationals in a number of countries to obtain the lifting of sanctions. It cited France and Russia in particular, and listed names said to have been obtained from two senior Iraqi officials captured in the summer. The 1,200 page report said the sanctions-busting deals netted the regime some \$11 billion.

Known oil voucher recipients included former French interior minister Charles Pasqua and Russian politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. The most serious charge against the UN is that Sevan himself accepted bribes.

There is little doubt that there was extensive corruption surrounding the programme. But the attempt to link this with opposition to the war is more spurious.

The programme was a means for transnational corporations to secure deals worth millions. But this was by no means confined to French, German and Russian corporations. The names of many US companies or citizens allegedly involved were left out of the initial ISG/CIA report on the grounds that not to do so would contravene the US privacy act. This had the political effect of focusing attention on the countries that had not backed the US-led war, but only with the aid of a lie of omission.

Additionally, all the contracts for Iraq in the \$64 billion Oil-for-Food Programme (OFP) were approved by the sanctions committee of the UN Security Council, whose permanent members include the US.

These facts will not deter the US from its attack on the UN, however. In total five US inquiries were begun into the OFP scandal and one in Iraq presided over by the US puppet regime led by Iyad Allawi. The most active in the campaign against the UN is the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, led by Republican Norm Coleman.

The committee has claimed that double the monies originally cited by the CIA—i.e., up to \$21 billion—were involved. They said the expanded figure was due to access to new documents and enlarging the period under consideration from 1991 to 2003. But UN officials point out that this figure included all the illegal revenue obtained by Saddam since sanctions were imposed in 1991, and not just the funds from illicit surcharges and kickbacks. About \$13.6 billion came from selling oil to neighbour states and about \$4.4 billion was supposedly earned through kickbacks on humanitarian goods supplied through the UN's programme.

The committee has attempted to subpoena a large number of UN contractors and has asked for the diplomatic immunity of UN personnel to be lifted so they too can be forced to testify.

Annan dismissed the allegations against France and Russia, stating that the charges were "inconceivable". "These are very serious and important governments. You are not dealing with banana republics."

The committee then ratcheted things up a gear with accusations indirectly implicating Annan himself. According to Michael Barnett, a former member of the US mission to the UN, leaked memos showed that Annan's son Kojo had enjoyed high level access to world leaders during UN sessions in New York and on his father's trips abroad and had been paid \$2,500 a month by his previous employer, the oil company Cotecna for years after he left them. Cotecna was hired by the UN between 1998 and 2003 to check and approve goods entering Iraq as part of the Oil-for-Food Programme.

UN spokesman Fred Eckhard dismissed any question of wrongdoing, stating that the payments were "nothing illegal", and were part of a no-compete contract allowing firms to pay ex-employees to stop them setting up in competition. Kojo Annan's work was said to focus entirely on operations in Nigeria and Ghana and had nothing to do with the Iraq programme.

Calls for Annan's resignation by Coleman were published in the *Wall Street Journal*, which acts as one of the leading spokesmen for the Republican right. Directly attacking the UN's own investigation, Coleman said, "As long as Mr Annan remains in charge, the world will never be able to learn the full extent of the bribes, kickbacks and under-the-table payments that took place under the UN's collective nose."

The White House has attempted to maintain a certain distance from the actions of Coleman and his committee, but this was not very convincing. The UN immediately asked if the Bush administration still had confidence in Annan, but US ambassador to the UN John Danforth pointedly avoided answering yes.

It was this that gave "the green light for Senator Coleman to lead this effort to have Mr Annan sacked", said the BBC's Justin Webb. The *Observer* also reported that the clamour against Annan "only reached fever pitch when influential Republicans, acting with the assumed backing of the White House, called for the resignation of Mr Annan. Some would not stop there: Congressman Scott Garrett said earlier this week that the question was 'whether he should be in jail'".

Speculation in the European press was not over whether or not Washington was directly involved, but what was the Bush administration's end goal. Was it pursuing a nuclear option, as favoured by the most right-wing opponents of the UN, and seeking to destroy its credibility all together; or was its intention to place maximum pressure on the UN to fall in line with US diktat, at a time when it has launched a review of its functioning including the possible make up of the Security Council—the body that decides on whether or not to endorse military hostilities such as Iraq.

An unnamed European diplomat said, "There's no doubt that there is a [faction] in Congress and in the media using a whole raft of issues to gun for the institution, and the way of doing that is through the person of the UN secretary general, but we've not heard that it came from the White House."

Another mused that the White House may be content with a shot across the bows, supposing that "a damaged, lame-duck secretary general would be even more convenient than a new person who would be pressing actively for reform."

Whatever one concludes, any attempt to portray the attack on Annan as the actions of the Republican fringe fail to explain why the White House did not act firmly and decisively to call things to a halt.

Certainly the reaction amongst European governments and others internationally was to see this as an attack orchestrated by Washington and to act accordingly.

When Annan appeared before the UN General Assembly to deliver a blueprint for UN reform, he was greeted by a prolonged standing ovation.

French President Jacques Chirac said he had telephoned the UN secretary general to express his support: "At a time when some voices—whose underlying motives are open to question—are trying to call into question the merits ... of Mr Kofi Annan, all of us in Europe, and indeed in Africa and Asia, consider it legitimate to express our gratitude and our friendship to the UN Secretary General."

At a lunch of the 15 UN Security Council members, there was unanimity that Annan should not step down. "Nobody in the room called for Kofi Annan's resignation. On the contrary, we all expressed our confidence in the secretary general," said German Ambassador Gunter Pleuger.

An open letter from prominent South Africans, including former President Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu said the campaign against Annan was being mounted by those who "regard the United Nations as a mouthpiece to extol and exonerate the policies of the United States of America, right or wrong."

Most significant was the position taken by Britain, which though closest

to Washington has sought to utilise the UN as a mechanism for curbing its unilateralist ambitions.

Prime Minister Tony Blair said Annan was doing "a fine job ... often in very difficult circumstances."

Former British UN ambassador Lord David Hannay stated, "The United States has many traditions, some good and some bad," he said. "The worst of the bad is the lynch mob. The best of the good is due process. We need more due process and less lynch mob."

It was not until after the full extent of the hostile reaction to the campaign against Annan was clear that the US finally made a gesture of support for his position.

Danforth said, "We are not suggesting or pushing for the resignation of the secretary-general. We have worked well with him in the past and look forward to working with him for some time in the future."

However, he still insisted that the alleged fraud had to be investigated, because there was "a cloud" over the UN. "The only way to dispel that cloud is to let the sunlight in," he added.

What is at stake in the campaign against Annan and the UN?

The US is at the very least seeking to make the UN directly subservient to its foreign policy diktats. This runs counter to the interests of the European powers in particular who, during the post war period and under conditions where America faced a significant rival in the Soviet Union, were able to use the UN as a means of applying a very limited restraint on Washington and in this way to defend their own interests.

However, the dissolution of the USSR has seen the development of a unilateralist strategy on the part of the US, with the Bush administration intent on capitalising on America's newfound status as the sole military superpower. The illegal war of aggression against Iraq demonstrated that the US was no longer prepared to allow its European allies to block its global ambitions in any way and that multilateralist institutions once used to regulate relations between the imperialist powers such as the UN were no longer acceptable.

For its part, the UN has offered no serious opposition to the US, whether over Iraq or any other question. Indeed Annan's review seeks to recast UN policy in terms acceptable to Washington as the world's pre-eminent imperialist power.

The review by a panel of 16 veteran diplomats and politicians, chaired by former Thai Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, was instructed to address the increasing threats of global terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and nuclear proliferation and to advocate a much more interventionist role in contrast to the UN's traditional emphasis that it cannot meddle in the internal affairs of a member state.

At the moment, the Council can order intervention, and a member state can act in self-defence, if there is an imminent threat. The Council can declare a threat to international security but the definition is vague and the procedure unwieldy.

The draft plan recommends that the Council should be more willing to act pre-emptively, stating that if governments fail in their "responsibility to protect" their citizens, then the UN can intervene. It also proposes redefining "threats" beyond the threat of war so as to include social, environmental and medical disasters. Intervention could also apply to "failing states" that "might breed terrorism, famine and other disasters."

This is not only in line with the US foreign policy based on the pre-emptive strike. But it also allows the other imperialist powers to act in a similar fashion, under the cover of the UN.

The draft also proposes an enlarged Security Council of 24 members, but maintains the veto power of the five current permanent members thus allowing the US to override or ignore any policy decision it disagrees with.

The issue is whether this will be enough to satisfy Washington. Certainly the most bellicose elements amongst Annan's neo-conservative critics in the US are not interested in reforming the UN.

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