Conference Scene / Le tour des conférences

Reforming the United Nations: The Use of Force to Safeguard International Security and Human Rights

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The UN’s recent crises raise crucial questions for scholars of international law. Does the US decision to invade Iraq without Security Council authorization leave the UN’s future role in doubt? Or does the US decision to seek Security Council assistance suggest that the UN cannot effectively be bypassed? What do Rwanda and Darfur teach us about the possibilities and limitations of UN collective security? What are the implications of the UN’s inaction for sovereignty and international law governing the use of force? Has the failure of UN collective security led to a right – or even an obligation – of humanitarian intervention?

On January 24 and 25, 2005, “Reforming the United Nations: The Use of Force to Safeguard International Security and Human Rights”, a conference at Northwestern University School of Law,¹ sought answers to these important and timely questions. Co-sponsored by Katholieke Universiteit Leuven,² the conference was the fourth in an annual series of Transatlantic Dialogues³ between the two law

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¹ With a substantive focus on international human rights and the globalization of business, Northwestern University School of Law, located in Chicago USA, prepares both domestic and international students for practice in the changing world while the faculty informs leading public policy decisions and debates regarding international human rights and international trade.

² Founded in 1425, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven is one of Europe’s leading academic institutions. It is a private, Flemish University of Catholic signature with an international orientation. A center of both research and education in a broad range of fields, K.U. Leuven offers programs that integrate professional training into a broad ethical, cultural and social context of education. Additional information is available at www.kuleuven.ac.be.

faculties. This year’s conference was born of a collaboration between Northwestern’s Center for International Human Rights and its Journal for International Human Rights, available at www.law.northwestern.edu/jihr, which will publish the proceedings of the conference as a special online edition. Panelists were drawn from academia, government, and policy-making circles on both sides of the Atlantic. The conference enjoyed wide public attendance, drawing a broad cross-section of law students and political thinkers in the Chicago area.

On the heels of heated UN debates over military intervention in Rwanda and Iraq, Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2003 convened a High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change. The panel was composed of 26 “eminent persons,” and published a report in December 2004 entitled “A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility”, which contained scores of recommendations for reforming the UN. The Northwestern conference focused on Panel recommendations in three inter-related areas: a) the use of force to preserve international security, b) the safeguarding of human rights, and c) restructuring the UN Security Council.

Sir David Hannay, a member of the Panel and former United Kingdom Ambassador to the UN, delivered the keynote address. Lord Hannay’s speech provided an insider’s account of the deliberations behind the High Level Report. The members of the panel, he noted, realized that the UN’s conception of collective security needs revision. Wars of conquest are no longer the primary threat to world peace. Terrorism, rogue states and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction know no boundaries and endanger all nations. Even intrastate conflicts, such as Kosovo, Rwanda and the Sudan, have an impact on global order – and global consciousness – that transcends their borders. Even as he recognized the emergence of these new dangers, Hannay reaffirmed his belief that the UN Charter is adequate to deal with them. What is needed, he argued, is the political will to enforce the Charter. Still, Hannay – and the High Level Report – left the question of what should happen in the case of a Security Council deadlock unanswered.

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4 Established in 1998, Northwestern Law’s Center for International Human Rights (www.law.northwestern.edu/humanrights) is dedicated to fostering the use and study of international law as a means to defend human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

5 Founded in 2003, the Northwestern University Journal of International Human Rights (www.law.northwestern.edu/jihr), a student-run, online legal publication, is dedicated to providing a dynamic new forum for the vigorous discussion of human rights issues among scholars of all disciplines and perspectives.