

BUSH, "SECURITY", AND THE EARTH SUMMIT FROM RIO+10 TO SEPTEMBER 11+1

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You can hardly open a newspaper these days without finding the latest revelations about how the White House and American intelligence failed to interpret signs that the September 11th attack was being prepared. Eleven months after that day, discussions about "security" seem to have stalled within that very narrow framework.

After all the talk, it remains a mystery as to why Bush scathingly rejects any and all attempts to address the root cause of US—and the rest of the world's—lack of real "security".

In the wake of September 11 last year, commentators and governments alike seemed in agreement that poverty—exacerbated by environmental destruction and the loss and inequitable use of natural resources—creates fertile breeding grounds for fundamentalism and terrorism. Many even foresaw that that day would mark a shift in US foreign policy, a return to multilateralism after its previous unilateral or isolationist stance. After all, George W. Bush called for a global war on terrorism. But this one-for-all-and-all-for-one approach didn't last long. As the Bush Administration flexed its muscles in Afghanistan and elsewhere, it intensified efforts to undermine the Johannesburg Earth Summit, which is due to begin August 26th. The US has gone to extreme measures to prevent the Summit from reaching any concrete agreements that would actually commit the US to take new measures to address the adverse effects of poverty and environmental abuse; or even live up to the agreements it signed in Rio ten years ago.

Bush is tearing down any chance of building the "security" he so claims to desire for the US and the rest of the world.

Yet, as Maurice Strong, the Secretary-General of the previous two UN conferences on environment and development held respectively in Stockholm (1972) and Rio (1992), said recently before a US Senate Committee, *"the transition to a sustainable development pathway is as essential to the future of the human community today as it was before [...] September 11".* *"The preoccupation with the ominous consequences of these horrendous acts is understandable and, indeed, necessary",* said Strong, *"But we must not allow this to sidetrack or undermine our efforts to achieve economic, environmental and social sustainability and security".*

Even US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who may well stand in for President Bush at the Summit next month, says in an upcoming article in the UNEP magazine that *"sustainable development" is a "compelling moral and humanitarian issue". "But sustainable development is also a security imperative. Poverty, environmental degradation and despair are destroyers-of people, of societies, of nations. This unholy trinity can destabilize countries, even entire regions".* We wait in anticipation to see whether Powell will deliver the same words—but with the action required—at the Summit.

As the US continues to take positions fundamentally at odds with its own long term security interests, it is still unclear on the eve of the Earth Summit whether the rest of the world will stand up to the US and assert some leadership. Whether the Summit will deliver the much-needed measures to eradicate environmental destruction and provide the means to eliminate poverty is still an open question. As Kofi Annan said on 17 July, *"progress since the [1992] Earth Summit has been slower than expected, and more important—slower than what was needed. A setback now would be a tragic missed opportunity".* The only real question today, thus, is how can we avoid the tragedy which Kofi Annan has foreshadowed? The only answer is for the international community to reject US unilateralism at the Summit, and in so doing to reject the US' apparent notion that it has a fundamental right to remain the world's largest polluter and to use up the lion's share of the Earth's natural resources; and to continue to promote an economic system

that protects its narrow domestic interests and keeps large portions of the rest of the world in poverty. It wouldn't be the first time the international community faced down the US.

While it is true that the influence of the United States on world politics obviously continues to be strong, it is equally true that the rest of the international community has managed in recent years to construct or solidify the edifice of international law, notwithstanding US opposition. The domination of American-led unsustainable consumption patterns and military power is certainly discouraging for the defenders of multilateralism and sustainability. However it can be seen as a hopeful sign that the US has not managed to completely stop the rest of the world's efforts to reinforce the architecture of international law.

The entry into force of the treaty establishing the international criminal court, despite its rejection by the US and its subsequent bullying to prevent other countries from joining it, is the most recent example. But this is only one in a long series which belies the conventional belief that the US continues to be a real leader in international politics.

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) which established in 1982 after long negotiations that the Ocean (70 % of our planet!) is a *global common* whose custody is the shared responsibility of humankind was also adopted in the face of military- and industry-led US opposition. Not only did the US fail to prevent UNCLOS from entering into force in 1994, but also the treaty is now universally considered international customary law, including in the US. The Ottawa Convention banning land mines is another important piece of international law negotiated in the 1990s because the rest of the international community resolved that it was important to put ethical and humanitarian considerations before the interests of the US military establishment. The list continues: a recent UN Convention on the Protection of Children, and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty of 1996 on nuclear weapons, are hard for the US to ignore, despite its formal opposition to them.

In the environmental field as well, progress was achieved despite the US acting as if they lived on another planet. Under pressure from pharmaceutical and biotechnology corporations who do not want to share with developing countries the benefits arising from the exploitation of genetic resources, they have yet to ratify the UN Convention on Biological Diversity of 1992. But—with only a handful of countries not party to it—this treaty now constitutes the global regime on the management and conservation of Life on Earth, whether the US likes it or not. Eight years after the Convention on Biological Diversity was adopted in Rio, a Protocol on Biosafety recognising the right of any country to say *no* to genetically modified organisms in food and agriculture was also adopted despite US and World Trade Organisation (WTO) pressure against it. An international treaty adopted in Basel, Switzerland, in 1989 on the transboundary movements of hazardous wastes despite US opposition now prohibits rich countries from dumping such wastes in developing countries. And one year after the Rio Earth Summit, in 1993, the US were forced to accept a world-wide ban on the dumping of radioactive wastes at sea despite the US navy interests in dumping its decommissioned nuclear submarines on the seabed.

Of course, much continues to be written about the US stance on the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change. After the European Union and Japanese ratification, the entry into force of the Kyoto legally binding targets for greenhouse gases reduction may happen soon. If the US continues to oppose it, it may yet again turn out to be the real *loser*.

As most world leaders get ready to come to Johannesburg in a few days time, President George W. Bush has reportedly indicated that he would not come unless the issue of climate change was removed from the Earth Summit agenda. This is not a new tactic: in 1992, up until just four days before the Rio Earth Summit, his father, then President George H.W. Bush, also maintained he would not come. But finally he came and signed the UN Convention on Climate Change which his son ironically is now trying to negate.

The linkage between climate change and poverty alleviation has been clearly established in numerous studies, including last year's Third Assessment Report of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—a group which consists of the world's leading experts on the subject.

Developing countries are the first victims of climate change for a variety of reasons, primarily because their populations are already vulnerable and they lack the resources to adapt and respond to droughts, floods and other extreme weather events, not to mention taking preventative measures. For this and other reasons, several countries have proposed to launch in Johannesburg a massive international programme to increase to 10% by 2010 the share of the world's energy supplied by new renewable energy (wind, solar, modern biomass, geothermal and small hydro), to kick start the revolution that is needed to protect the climate in the long term. They have also proposed to provide clean, affordable and sustainable energy to the two billion poor who currently have no access to modern energy services. The proposal requires the progressive elimination of government subsidies to conventional forms of energy (mainly coal, oil and nuclear) which amount to between 250 and 300 billion US\$ per annum! Dominated by the coal, oil and nuclear industry, the Bush administration wants to sink the proposal, which it tagged as "unrealistic" and "arbitrary".

But what will happen the week after the Earth Summit, on the first anniversary of September 11, if the US gets its way? The Earth Summit is a fantastic opportunity to show on September 11, 2002 that the Western world is serious about its duty to deal with the evils wrought by poverty and environmental degradation, including provision of the technical and financial assistance that was promised to developing countries ten years ago. But if nothing concrete comes out of Johannesburg to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, the September 11 commemoration will further nurture anger, frustrations and cynicism, with all the consequences this entails.

Of course, it would be best if the US were part of a real global deal in Johannesburg. But if George Bush does not want to come to Johannesburg, so be it. Maybe it is an opportunity for the rest of the world to take leadership and work together.

Johannesburg is likely to be the last large global UN summit for many years. If the rich few come to the summit with empty hands (or worse, empty promises), and the representatives of poor countries go home with nothing, we—and our children and grandchildren—will all face the consequences. Maybe G.W. Bush will have managed to damage the multilateral system and the United Nations, but he will have failed to make the world a safer place.