

Don't ban your inst



By John R Bolton

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BAN Ki-moon, the new UN secretary general, has done some unusual things to kick off his tenure. At the recent annual dinner of the UN Correspondents Association in New York, for instance, he entertained the guests briefly by singing, to the tune originally written for Santa Claus, his own arrangement: "Ban Ki-moon is coming to town."

On Tuesday, Ban is coming to this town, his first visit since assuming office on Jan 1. The former South Korean foreign minister has already made it clear that he intends to be a different kind of "SG" from his predecessor. The United States backed Ban for his new post, largely with such a change in mind. Nonetheless, his first few days in office have already raised some questions. The struggle is underway to determine what sort of leader Ban will be: Will the status quo of the UN system overwhelm him, or will he follow his instincts and those of his supporters, including Washington?

Consider the following issues:

First, responding to Iraq's recent execution of Saddam Hussein, Ban said that the decision of whether to invoke the death penalty is a matter for each UN member state to decide for itself. This provoked howls of outrage from the international high-minded, who over the past decade had successfully encouraged UN resolutions opposing the death penalty from the UN Human Rights Commission (a body that eventually was abolished because it had only an incidental relationship with human rights). "The UN is against the death penalty!" the high-minded complained, arguing that Ban's comments amounted to a retreat from

secretary general must mouth the position adopted by a majority of countries in some UN body, whether legitimately or not, is a prescription for endless trouble. Were earlier secretaries supposed to declare routinely that "Zionism is a form of racism," as the General Assembly solemnly and overwhelmingly decided in 1975?

According to the UN Charter, the secretary general is the institution's "chief administrative officer" - not its chief moralizer. Those who complain that Ban's comment forfeited the role that Annan so ardently played should understand instead that Annan's proclivities were not ultimately helpful to the world body. If

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Kofi Annan's public outspokenness for the so-called UN position. Shaken by this barrage, Ban partly backed down later, urging the Iraqi government to stay the execution of the two men sentenced to death along with Hussein.

But his first instinct was the right one. The real controversy here is not about the death penalty, but more fundamentally about the proper role of the United Nations itself, and especially of the secretary general. The United Nations as an institution cannot have a legitimate position on a domestic issue such as the death penalty when there is such fundamental disagreement among its sovereign members - and especially where democratically legitimate governments have different views. To say that the

he had spent less time moralising and more time doing his day job, the United Nations may have been spared the oil-for-food scandal, procurement fraud and widespread sexual exploitation and abuse by its peacekeepers.

Even more problematic than the death penalty debate was another matter Ban raised during his first week on the job. In an interview, he argued that "if the issues with the conflicts between Israel and Palestine go well", other issues, such as Iran and Lebanon, "are likely to follow suit". This position is unquestionably the received wisdom in Turtle Bay, and also reflects the view of Ban's predecessor.

It is unclear whether Ban was articulating his

Instincts, Ban Ki-moon

personal view or was merely following the talking points provided by the UN secretariat. The idea that Hezbollah's efforts to destabilize and overthrow the democratically elected government of Lebanon might be curtailed or eliminated by progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front is hard to take seriously. Similarly, believing that peace and stability would emerge in Iraq if only those troublesome Israelis could be brought into line is more a matter of faith than of logic.

Ban's reliance on this favourite UN cliché, however, is more than simply a lapse in judgement; it may well reveal his intentions for future involvement in the Middle East, an involvement

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embodied in the "Quartet", an ungainly occasional gathering of the United States, Russia, the European Union and the secretary general. US policymakers should start working overtime now to correct the misimpression that Ban may have obtained from his briefers. In the even worse case that Ban's comment reflects his own views, the need for corrective action is even more acute.

Much to his credit, Ban has already made history early in his tenure. He announced last week that he will make public his financial disclosure report, the first UN secretary general ever to do so - and something that Annan repeatedly refused to do. Ban has stressed that he wants to restore trust and confidence in the

United Nations, which it sorely needs. And although much more must follow to even approximate the recommendations of the Volcker Commission in the wake of the oil-for-food scandal, Ban's disclosure will be a good first step.

Accountability begins with transparency, and within the UN system, the secretary general is especially well-placed to lead by example. That Ban's decision was even newsworthy underscores how much work still remains, and



how easy it was to start. As a longtime civil servant in South Korea, Ban is likely to offer a short and boring financial report, as one may have also expected from Annan, a longtime UN civil servant. In fact, Annan could go a long way toward regaining trust and confidence even now by disclosing his UN-era finances.

Finally, Ban also made the courageous decision to call for the resignations of all senior secretariat officials, about 60 altogether, except those chosen with the concurrence of other UN bodies. This was a change that Washington had

urged, one that can make clear that high-level UN jobs are not entitlements, either for the individuals involved or their countries of origin. Because this sort of transitional "cleaning house" is unfamiliar to the UN system, US advocacy of the concept raised questions, and Ban's decision to implement it will undoubtedly raise more.

Ban need not accept all of the resignations, although he should accept the vast majority, for the same salutary reason why incoming US administrations bring in new people at the top levels of government. The key is to shake up the secretariat's entrenched baronies, and to let them know that new management is in charge. Although it may not be noteworthy to Americans, Ban's decision on resignations was striking within the United Nations. On the hiring side, he has not made enough appointments to judge whether he is assembling a team with the right stuff - this obviously warrants close US attention.

No one of these four incidents, nor all of them together, tell the complete story of Ban Ki-moon. Where he has followed his instincts - deferring to member governments, supporting UN reform and demonstrating personal integrity - he has done well. When he has followed the conventional wisdom inside the UN bubble on First Avenue in New York - on matters of UN theology such as the death penalty and the Middle East - he has not. In Washington this week, the president and others will again have the chance to take his measure. Based on what we have seen so far, I hope they encourage him to let Ban be Ban. COURTESY THE WASHINGTON POST

John R Bolton, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, served as US permanent representative to the United Nations from August 2005 to December 2006