

Annan is no appeaser of Iraq

by Edward Mortimer

Ever since Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary-general, went to Baghdad last February and persuaded President Saddam Hussein to open his "presidential sites" to UN inspectors, he has been viewed with suspicion by parts of the U.S. media and political establishment. Although he obtained what all five permanent members of the UN Security Council had demanded, there was a widespread feeling that he had "let Saddam off the hook."

Over the last year this rumble of criticism has steadily escalated, as it became apparent that Mr. Annan's agreement with Iraq, however brave a try, had not solved the problem between Iraq and the Security Council. It reached a climax last week after a report in the Washington Post gave Mr. Annan as the main source for allegations that UN arms inspectors had "helped collect eavesdropping intelligence used in American efforts to undermine the Iraqi regime."

In essence there are two charges against Mr. Annan. The more general one is that he is an appeaser, determined to defuse the confrontation with Iraq at any cost, turning a blind eye to all Saddam Hussein's past crimes and capabilities for further mischief. More specifically, he is accused of undermining the UN Special Commission (Unsc) set up to disarm Iraq, and particularly its executive chairman, Richard Butler.

After six months working with Mr. Annan in his executive office, I am convinced that both accusations are false. First, he has no illusions about the nature of Saddam's regime or its track record of aggression and of manufacturing and using prohibited weapons, as well as appalling human rights violations. Nor is he a pacifist. He fully recognizes, and has often said, that there are times when the use of force is necessary to maintain international order and

preserve human lives. Few will have forgotten his statement in Baghdad last February that diplomacy is even better when backed up by "firmness and force" than on its own. At other times he has deplored the slowness of the international community in intervening to halt ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and its abject failure to prevent genocide in Rwanda.

But the question he has repeatedly asked over the last year is whether the use of force, particularly in the form of aerial bombardment, can provide an effective response to Iraq's cat-and-mouse game with Unsc inspectors. While the threat of force may have produced results, it was never clear what the next move would be once force had actually been used. When the U.S. and U.K. did resort to bombing last

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month Mr. Annan did not condemn them. But he did express a genuine and heartfelt sadness that in the end — thanks largely to continued Iraqi obstruction — all his efforts had failed to avert such an outcome.

What, if anything, the bombing has actually achieved it is perhaps too soon to say. What it has not done, apparently, is to make Iraq more willing to cooperate with Unsc inspectors. At present there seems little prospect of them returning to work soon.

Which brings us to the second accusation. Has Mr. Annan deliberately undermined Unsc and its work? No, he has not. He has had some differences with Mr. Butler, and occasionally, in response to journalists' questions, has said mildly critical things about him in public. But these differences and criticisms relate to style, not substance. They reflect an anxiety that some of Mr.

Butler's blunter public remarks might play into Saddam's hands by diverting attention away from the vital question of how effectively Iraq has been disarmed onto Unsc itself and its chairman's personality.

Now it is alleged that U.S. intelligence was using Unsc inspection missions, with or without Mr. Butler's knowledge, to serve the U.S.'s "unilateral" aim of overthrowing the Iraqi regime, as opposed to finding and destroying its weapons. That, of course, would go well beyond anything authorized by Security Council resolutions. We in the UN Secretariat first heard about these allegations from journalists, who had got them from sources in Washington. Was Mr. Annan concerned? Of course he was. If the allegations were true it would mean that a UN agency had abandoned the professional impartiality which is vital to its success. That would end any remaining chance of getting Iraq to resume cooperation with it. And the credibility of UN missions in other parts of the world could well be affected.

But it is not true that Mr. Annan took the initiative in authenticating or publicizing these rumors. If any of his "advisers" or "confidants" really did so, they badly misunderstood and misrepresented his views. He still does not know for sure whether the rumors are true or not.

Worrying as that question is, it pales into insignificance beside another. How, eight years after Desert Storm, are we going to deal with Iraq? Saddam is still there, much as many people might wish otherwise.

The country's economy is at a standstill. A whole generation is growing up barely educated. Can we offer it any future, other than permanent sanctions, enlivened by occasional bombing? Answers on a postcard please to the Security Council.

The author, formerly foreign affairs editor of the Financial Times, is currently working as chief speechwriter to Kofi Annan

Opinion

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