

United Nations complicity in war crimes

Interview with former UN assistant secretary-general Hans-Christof von Sponeck

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For Hans Christof von Sponeck, the former assistant secretary-general of the UN, the United Nations, far from guarding the respect for international law and the consolidation of peace, have themselves become a factor of injustice. Thus, the sanctions imposed on Saddam Hussein's Iraq caused a human disaster, whereas treaties such as the nuclear non-proliferation treaty are used to ensure the domination of certain powers and to threaten others. It is time to change the system completely.

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Hans-Christof von Sponeck Count Hans-Christof von Sponeck, born in Bremen in 1939, has been working for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for 32 years. Appointed by Kofi Annan in 1998 as United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq, with the status of UN Assistant to the Secretary General, Mr. von Sponeck resigned in March 2000 in protest against the sanctions, which had led the Iraqi people to misery and starvation. It is with sorrow and bitterness that he speaks about the sufferings endured by the Iraqis, a people he knew well and learned to love, and he appeals to the political leaders responsible for the catastrophe in a moving interview he gave to Silvia Cattori.

Silvia Cattori: In your book "A Different War: The UN Sanctions Regime in Iraq", [1] you denounced openly the fact that the Security Council betrayed the principles of the UN Charter. Could you give us specific examples where the UN Secretariat behaved in an especially condemnable way?

Hans von Sponeck: The Security Council must follow the UN Charter and it must not forget the Convention on the rights of the child and the general implications of these conventions. Moreover, if the Security Council knows that conditions in Iraq are inhuman - people of all ages have been in deep trouble, not because of a dictator, but because of the policies around the 'oil for food programme' - and it decides not to act, or not to do enough to protect the people against the impact of its policy, then one can argue very easily that the Security Council is to be blamed, for the very strong increase in the mortality rates in Iraq. A definite example is that during the 1980s, under the government of Saddam Hussein, UNICEF identified 25 children per thousand under the age five years of age that were dying in Iraq for various reasons. During the years of sanctions, from 1990 to 2003, there was a sharp increase from 56 per thousand children under five years of age in the early 1990s to 131 per thousand under five years of age at the beginning of the new century. Now everyone can easily understand that this was due to the economic sanctions, so it is out of the question that the Security Council preferred to ignore the consequences of its policies in

Iraq under the pressure exercised by the major intervening parties including, and in particular, the United States and Great Britain.

Silvia Cattori: How could the Security Council neglect to consider the fact that these sanctions allowed the superpowers to misuse their position and uniquely pursue their war objectives, when it voted for other resolutions, like for example resolution 1559 which was particularly intended to provide the United States and Israel with a cover for future military strikes? Does that mean that the Security Council and the UN Secretariat, supposed to defend the people, have become mainly responsible for humanitarian catastrophes?

Hans von Sponeck: I would say, only those who either are ignorant, or those who cannot accept the defeat, will continue to argue that the humanitarian drama in Iraq was largely not due - not exclusively but to a large extent -to an erroneous policy, a policy of punishment. The Iraqi people were punished for having accepted the government in Baghdad, even though they were completely innocent.

Silvia Cattori: Our political leaders, who are present in all international bodies, knew perfectly well that these sanctions would have disastrous consequences. Does that mean that, by remaining silent, they have accepted innocent civilians to be killed, tortured, and starved?

Hans von Sponeck: I would say, unless the international community has a very bad memory, we cannot forget that, either there was silence or there was connivance, support, or there was a deliberate effort to promote conditions of the kind that prevailed in Iraq during thirteen years of sanctions. Therefore, you get different levels of accountability, of political accountability. Not only the Prime Minister of Great Britain and the President of the United States and their governments are responsible, but others as well; Spain and Italy played a supportive role that means the former governments are responsible as well. Mr Aznar in Madrid and Mr Berlusconi in Italy are very much responsible for having contributed to the humanitarian disaster that evolved in Iraq. They will not accept this responsibility but the evidence is there.

Silvia Cattori: If the manipulation of the Security Council by the United States is the main problem and if the US continues to commit crimes pretending that they have a UN mandate, what can be done to correct that unacceptable situation?

Hans von Sponeck: I think that this is a very important question. It is relevant for the debate about what kind of United Nations we need to protect the international community or to protect the 192 member governments from the danger that certain other governments misuse their authority, their information, their finances and their power to serve their own interest, but against the interests of peace, the interests of justice and the interests of mankind.

Silvia Cattori: How did you react to the execution of Saddam Hussein and his co-defendants, sentenced to death by a tribunal established by the USA?

Hans von Sponeck: I would say, first of all, that I was not surprised. This was the ultimate objective of those in power in Baghdad and of those who occupy Iraq. It is impossible to defend Saddam Hussein, but we can respond to the fact that there was no due process, but a masquerade. It was a tribunal that hid a prearranged death sentence under the cover of respectability. Saddam Hussein, like any other person, deserved the right to a fair trial, but

he was not given a fair trial. And therefore I was upset by this obvious act, although we have international law, despite the fact that the European nations, the US and Canada as well as other western nations repeatedly express their intention to maintain justice, that they in fact did not protect justice.

Silvia Cattori: You wrote to President Bush and asked him to free Tarek Aziz. Did you get an answer?

Hans von Sponeck: I did not get an answer. I wrote this letter because I know Mr Tarek Aziz. My predecessor and I both think he is a person with whom we had a correct relationship, a person who - despite what we read in the mainstream media - tried to look to the Iraqi people. He was ready and willing to consider proposals for the improvement of the humanitarian aid programme. From our perspective, from my perspective, he was a correct person. I cannot judge what Mr Tarek Aziz did in Iraq outside my fields of responsibility, but all I want to ask for is that a person, who is ill, if for no other than humanitarian reasons, should be treated with dignity, should be allowed to obtain medical care while having a fair trial. Just like Saddam Hussein, Tarek Aziz deserved, and deserves, to be treated in accordance with international law, in accordance with The Hague and the Geneva Conventions. I object to the fact that over three years after he voluntarily turned himself in to the occupation forces, he has not even been charged, and still remains in custody while he is badly in need of medical care.

Silvia Cattori: While the situation created by the occupation of Iraq is frightening, it is to be feared that the Resolution against Iran will be used by the United States to strike that country. The German Navy - formally under UN mandate - is in place in the Eastern Mediterranean. Is it because you know to what extent your country is involved in the projects of war of the United States that you recently wrote an open letter to Mrs Angela Merkel asking her to refuse all use of violence against Iran?

Hans von Sponeck: That is correct. I feel very strongly that, gradually, Germany and other European countries are getting involved into power policy defined in Washington by power-hungry people. This is becoming more serious because these power-hungry people begin to realize that they cannot, on their own, implement a policy of domination. So they need the help of other governments now, and these others seem to be Central-European and Eastern European governments from Lithuania to Great Britain. They also try to politicise NATO and make it an instrument, which to a large extent has in fact already become a US instrument. Therefore, just like any normal individual in this world, I cannot accept the attempts - supported by Chancellor Merkel during the recent NATO summit - to provide this military alliance with a political mission. NATO is an instrument of the Cold War; for many years NATO was looking for a new mission, for a new role. The only thing the allies knew was that they have a military responsibility but, with the end of the Cold War in Europe, that responsibility no longer existed and was no longer necessary. So there was this desperate search for a new role.

I personally think that it is extremely dangerous that NATO now presents itself as a democratic instrument for western democracies while, in fact, it is a tool in the hands of the United States to implement the Project for the 'New American Century'. Neoconservatives in the United States made this famous proposal in the 1990s - while the Bush administration converted it into its national security strategy of 2002 and subsequent years - and NATO is supposed to assist its implementation. The responsible politicians that recently met in

Munich should have rejected this concept. Mr Vladimir Putin, the Russian President for once did not mince his words and expressed plainly what many of us feel. Of course, those who follow a different agenda rejected his suggestions. However, there is a reality in what Mr Putin said.

I am convinced that, due to this militarised politicisation of NATO, we will have taken a big step backwards to what is not only a Cold War atmosphere between major powers, but also, and this is the tragedy, to an increase in defence spending in many countries including China, Russia, and Western Europe. This spending has already been greatly increased in numerous countries, and it can serve no other purpose than escalating the polarisation between different groups around the world. The world beyond Central Europe and North America is no longer willing to accept a western one-sided policy. The public no longer accepts the requirements of last century's military and economic powers. Their days are over and, if we do not take this into account, we will only make things worse. To me, the key words at the moment are dialogue and diplomacy. We have to accomplish this in a clearly multilateral spirit, not in the spirit of a superpower, which is anything but a superpower be it economically, politically or morally, let alone ethically. Even if there is a little bit of superpower spirit left in the United States because of its military power, it is not going to be enough to save the 'Pax Americana'. 'Pax Americana' is a thing of the past and the sooner we recognise this in Europe and prepare ourselves for multilateral cooperation - which is something different from the bilateral or NATO type cooperation - the better it will be.

Silvia Cattori: NATO is taking part in wars of occupation - in contradiction to its own Charter - and, in collaboration with the CIA, it is involved in secret criminal operations: What I think of in this context are the abductions of suspects to secret prisons. If Europe continues to submit itself to and accepts the installation of American anti-missile systems in NATO member states, might this not lead to confrontation, or even to the return to the worst days of Cold War?

Hans von Sponeck: It is insane. There is no excuse, and Condoleezza Rice's argument according to which Russia had no reason to worry about ten anti-missile systems to be stationed in Poland and in the Czech Republic is so dishonest. If ten can be placed today, twenty might be placed tomorrow. The very fact that these antimissile systems are positioned at the border of the former USSR, or Russia, is already enough to augment the reasons for confrontation between Russia and the West, let alone China.

We are creating and we are shaping tomorrow's enemy. I, and with me many others around the globe, cannot accept this development. We do not count, however, we are weak, we are considered naïve, we are considered 'blue-eyed people', as the Americans have often called us, who do not understand the 'global vision'.

Well, if we are living in a democracy, then I have the right to understand this 'global vision', but I am not informed about it. I am just asked to rely on the good will and on the good intentions of a government like the one in Washington. But I cannot do so, we cannot do so, because we have been disappointed over and over again by misinformation, by brutal dishonesty, by power politics that only served one party. I am far from accepting this and, therefore I regard the whole policy of convincing the Czech and Polish governments to have these antimissile systems as extremely dangerous and misplaced. That is nothing but blatant and brutal power politics, which we do not need and which we will fight against. Peace, future internationalism and the consolidation of nations and progress - in the spirit of the UN Charter and other international laws - don't have any need of that.

Silvia Cattori: You were in Kuala Lumpur in February, to attend a conference on war crimes. There was, in the West, very limited media coverage on this important event. If such meetings, which denounce the drifts of NATO and the violations of the UN Charter, are ignored, how can a debate be opened for reforming these organisations? Don't you feel like speaking in a desert while the media, the UN, the States, go on lying and ignore your struggle?

Hans von Sponeck: Well, you know, one should not be discouraged by the fact that the media ignore us. Most of the time, when citizens tried to convince their leaders to change direction, they have been ignored. Well, should that be the end of the effort? I do not think so. The very fact that people, not just fools, not just misguided dreamers, but very realistic people who have an overall view on the world, who understand the political processes, come together to debate in a serious way the conditions and misuse of power, gives important evidence that the international conscience is alive, that an international conscience exists. Kuala Lumpur did not make it to the headlines; Hollywood makes it to the headlines, cheap emotionalism, and cheap quality media events like the Big Brother programme in London make headlines.

The fact that 5000 people got together in Kuala Lumpur to discuss war as a crime, against the background of all the global sufferings that these illegal wars have caused, did not make it to the headlines is regrettable, but it should not make people less willing to speak out. Those attacked by these crimes should notice it. Every one of us, as an individual, has a responsibility to observe, has to make his or her views known. In addition, I am sure that the Kuala Lumpur meeting has created more awareness in many circles around the world, which will ultimately be transferred into a greater resistance against these feint and selfish and one-sided policies that the West tries to enforce.

I am not anti-West, I am a 'Westerner' but that does not mean that I cannot critically look at the one-way street which has developed, the one-way traffic on which international power, international trade, international culture are travelling. That, as I have said before, cannot continue because it is no longer acceptable, and Kuala Lumpur brought together people from all over the world, who are of the same opinion. So this has, I am sure, added to an awareness, and a willingness to invest time in order to make views known. And if that does not hit the headlines today and bring about a change immediately, it may do so tomorrow, and if it is not tomorrow, then the next day.

Silvia Cattori: Voices who, like Mr Jimmy Carter's and Mr John Dugard's denounce the crimes of Israel in Palestine, voices who, like Mr Dennis Halliday's [2] and your own voice put the finger on UN's drifting off course in Iraq, all these voices are demanding for an immense respect. However, these are rare voices, which can be easily marginalised by the political powers. Aren't you disappointed that hardly anybody or only a few people at your level follow your example and take position against these state crimes and abuses?

Hans von Sponeck: Of course, I am disappointed. You know, these days, every day, I am waiting anxiously for a senior American general, a senior American political personality to come out and say: enough is enough, I will not continue to support insanity, I will not go on supporting illegality, I will no longer support policies that have led us into deep difficulties and deep violations of anything that a civilised person should stand for. Of course, one is disappointed, but in view of what has happened during the last few decades, particularly during the years when Mr Bush has been in power, we cannot allow ourselves to be idle. This is an appeal for the international peace movement which should be oriented towards a

better coordination, i.e. much better networking, much more combined effort, much more joint declarations. People from all over the world should join hands and demonstrate to themselves and to the larger public that they have the firm intention not to accept what has led us into a world in which the gulf is wide open between those who have nothing – and that is a very, very large majority, over one billion people out of the six and a half billion people on our planet living with less than one dollar a day – and the top ten percent who are living in unimaginable luxury and well being.

This cannot continue. And if some people who listen to our conversation may say 'here is really a very naïve person', and others say 'look this is a communist, terrible, he is asking for equality for everybody', I will tell them 'no, I am not'. First of all I do not think I am naïve, secondly, I do not think I am a communist in the traditional sense. I am a person who, in 32 years of work for the United Nations and beyond, has learned to accept the fact that all of us are not equal, but that all of us should have equal opportunities to develop our own contribution to peace. It is not a question of lack of money, there is plenty of money for everybody but, what is missing is the will to share the resources and to do more than pay lip service to this wonderful body of instruments that has been established by good people after the Second World War. Over the last sixty years, this body has tried to lay the basis for greater justice and for socioeconomic progress for everybody.

Silvia Cattori: All the hope that you feed must make you suffer, as you are well aware that for the Muslim peoples that the West is humiliating, the worst is still to come?

Hans von Sponeck: Of course. If you read and if you see, what is happening in the Middle East, there is no single day on which you do not feel ashamed, you do not feel the humiliation that strikes us when we see these poor people suffering hard, people from Palestine to Iraq and in other parts of the Middle East as well. The human language is not, at least for me, capable of expressing the feelings that I really have. It is horrifying. I come from a country, which experienced and caused this horrible Second World War. It lasted for five years, and we still talk about it. What about the many years in Iraq, thirty years of dictatorship, and thirteen years of sanctions, and now three and a half years of occupation: how much can an individual, how much can a nation endure? And if you see – I think of the universities I visited was in Baghdad, Mustanseriyah University, Baghdad College, Baghdad University – that these institutions where young innocent people are supposed to prepare for life, were destroyed by bombs. When I was in Iraq, I saw people living peacefully in integrated neighbourhoods! I never heard a conversation like "I am a Shiite, you are a Sunnite, and you are a Turcoman" at that time.

Baghdad is the largest Kurdish city of the world with over one million Kurds, and there were many problems, for sure, there was a dictator, there were political murderers but, compared with what we see today, that was nothing. The sectarian confrontation that exists now was created by this illegal war. And the threat towards the Al-Maliki government is the limit of dishonesty: "If you do not bring security to Iraq, then we, the Americans, will reconsider to what extent we will continue our support". What is this? Who established these kinds of conditions? Who is responsible for this chaos and the sectarian confrontation?

Silvia Cattori: Western countries condemn Iran that has signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, for a bomb that it does not have. They do not condemn Israel that did not sign this treaty, and that has nuclear bombs. Choosing between Israel that does not conceal preparing for waging a pre-emptive nuclear war, and Iran who wants to have a civil nuclear industry, is not Israel the one that is really threatening world peace, and is not Iran the

target? How do you react to this denial of justice?

Hans von Sponeck: I have only one immediate response: it is a classical example of a double standard. We have a demand for a nuclear free zone: It is the Security Council's resolution 687 of April 1991 which in paragraph 14, calls for a nuclear free zone for the complete Middle East. Israel has not even signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Iran may have intentions that are against the long-term international interests, but Iran has not yet passed the red line. Mister El-Baradei, the director of the International Atomic Agency did not say that Iran had passed that line. All he did was to say that Iran has not fully disclosed, not transparently enough, its intentions and that Iran has put more centrifuges into operation.

But what an extraordinary demonstration of double standards, not to point the finger at Israel and others! What about Pakistan, what about India? And about the US itself which is openly working on a new generation of nuclear weapons, totally in violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty of which the US is an initiator. So this is a disastrous double standard. If I were an Iranian, I would say: 'Sorry, take yourself measures to put into practice of what you say is the norm and then we can talk, let's sit down at the table, at the same eye level, with no preconditions.'

I accept the Iranian demand for dialogue. I think it is absolutely the right thing to do. Iran says: 'You have a disagreement, so let's meet, but do not come and tell me before I can meet you, that I must have fulfilled certain conditions that you want me to fulfil; I am sorry, we come, we meet, we talk, and we lay the cards on the table. And what we discover when we look at reality is a frightening attempt to keep up a double standard.'

Silvia Cattori: What message would you like to give to those political leaders who do not care about human rights who wage wars and violating international and human rights? What message would you like to give to the populations who are, at present, exposed to the terror of occupying states? And what message would you like to give to those who oppose these wars but do not know how to stop them and are grieving over the inaction of the political parties?

Hans von Sponeck: To those who are violating human rights, I would say: You must live with your own guilty conscience, and how can you, in the light of all the evident damage, live with your guilty conscience? Don't you think that there are better ways to protect your interests by at the same time allowing others to benefit from existing opportunities?

To those who are victims and those who are concerned, I would say: Never give up, just try your best, we all live in freedom, as healthy individuals, to make our contribution small as they may be. If we gather for that aim, if we cooperate, if we network, if we try to make our views known to those in power, we can make a contribution. We can use our votes -those of us who live in countries with free elections - let us make use of our votes but not in a mechanical way. For it is a great act of responsibility to cast a vote. Know your political candidates, put pressure on them, hold them accountable, check their records and, when there is a re-election, if you are not satisfied, encourage those who deserve your confidence to run for office. What else can we do?

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