

## Focus on the United Nations at the New York AAG Annual Meeting

When geographers meet in New York this February for the 2012 AAG Annual Meeting, we will be only a few blocks from the headquarters of the United Nations (UN), site of one of the most powerful institutions affecting global geographies. In New York we will honor Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland, and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, with the AAG Atlas Award, and we will also sponsor several special sessions critically assessing the UN and its achievements.

The UN is a post-World War II invention, founded in 1945 with four main goals, to: "1) keep peace throughout the world; 2) develop friendly relations among nations; 3) help nations work together to improve the lives of poor people, to conquer hunger, disease and illiteracy, and to encourage respect for each other's rights and freedoms; 4) be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations to achieve these goals" (<http://un.org>). The 193-member General Assembly is advised by more than fifty international boards, commissions, councils, and working groups, and the UN sponsors more than sixty agencies, institutions, programs, and other subsidiary bodies. In the past decade the UN has initiated 47 international declarations and conventions, which represent a record of collective international response to some of the most pressing international issues. On its website are hundreds of maps that spatially document UN activities and missions.

Opinions on the worth of the UN will vary. Has it been a force for peace? A fair arbiter of international relations? How effective are its efforts to advance human rights, the safety of international migrants, access to food and safe water, educational, scientific, and cultural knowledge? Has it advanced, maintained, or ameliorated the uneven effects of capitalism and the remains of colonial domination? Has it broken down or supported existing international power structures?

Space does not allow me to review existing geographical scholarship on the United

Nations, but it is surprisingly sparse given the remarkable influence of this organization upon the contemporary world. Perhaps this is an opportune time to consider some of the most important issues surrounding its geographic effects of UN activities. I will mention just three, all areas wide open for research and debate.

First, peacekeeping is one of the major and most visible UN activities. Currently almost 123,000 UN troops from 144 countries are deployed in fifteen peacekeeping situations around the world, all precisely mapped, including both conflict zones and natural disaster recovery zones. The three principles of peacekeeping are 1) Consent of the parties; 2) Impartiality; 3) Non-use of force except in self-defense and defense of the mandate. The mandate is complex and conflicted. The geography is multifaceted. Many of the peacekeeping personnel have been professionally trained as geographers. Less common, however, is geographical research that addresses the conflicts of conflict zones, the distribution of conflict zone designation around the world, the geographic factors in timely response, and the role and efficacy of peacekeeping missions on the ground.

Second, in 2007, the General Assembly adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, originally endorsed by 144 states. Four—The U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—originally opposed the declaration but later signed on after considering the relationship between the document and their existing constitutions. The document includes a range of human rights issues, including rights to Indigenous self-determination, preservation of social, political, and cultural institutions, and nationality. Scholars have now begun to address questions such as "Who is indigenous?" with results that are anything

but straightforward. Colonialism caused two major geographical dispossessions: the dispossession and eradication of indigenous peoples *in situ*, and the large-scale movement, through slavery and indentured labor, of peoples who *were* indigenous in their homelands of Asia and Africa to colonial destinations where their labor was used in part to supplant indigenous peoples. The contradictions between these two forms of spatial displacement are with us today, and require attention by geographers who are able to set the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in context. At the

very least, we require a critical examination of the repercussions of territory having been conceptualized through a lens of colonialism.

A third example of the contradictory effects of UN actions is the follow-up to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban in 2001. The U.S. pulled out of the conference mainly because of complications arising from discussions of whether Zionism is racism. This is a complicated issue, but at the very least it illustrates that any discussion of marginalization and historic oppression at the international level lays bare the conflicting ideologies over nation, territory, and identity upon which rest ongoing violence and conflict. The field of geopolitics, which thrives in geography, is open to a host of important questions concerning the role of UN activities in ongoing processes of racialization, colonialism, and strategic international relations.

Yes, opinions will vary greatly on the questions I briefly raise here. I hope that the New York meeting will buzz with creative, scholarly answers. ■

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