

SAINT AND SCAPEGOAT: Kofi Annan's mixed legacy

Many of the tributes pouring in for Kofi Annan, who died last weekend at the age of 80, fail to mention that the career of this former United Nations Secretary-General was marred by several scandals which tarnished the reputation of this world body and left a sour taste in the mouths of millions of people who suffered as a result of the UN's actions or inactions. This soft-spoken Ghanaian, who gained rock star appeal for his quiet charisma and diplomatic skills, is particularly revered in Kenya where he helped broker a peace deal between Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga after the disputed 2007 election and its violent aftermath. Many agree that were it not for his negotiating skills, Kenya might have sunk into a cataclysmic abyss.

Internationally, his contribution to world peace was considered so important that he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001. One could say that Annan acquired a saint-like status during his tenure as the world's top diplomat. But he was hardly flawless, though the tonnes of charisma that he projected and his messiah-like gravitas softened most of his critics. You could say that he was the Teflon UN Secretary-General – no scandal left him permanently scathed.

That is why, as they heap praise on Annan, most journalists and commentators tend to overlook the many blunders that occurred under his watch, the most devastating of which occurred in Iraq. Many people forget that the Iraq Oil-for-Food scandal – which led to the loss of billions of dollars – occurred during Annan's tenure. The programme, the result of sanctions against Saddam Hussein's government after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991, has been described as the biggest corruption scandal in the UN's history.

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Annan was at the helm of the UN in 2004 when it was revealed that Saddam had infiltrated the programme and had managed to divert billions of dollars meant for the Iraqi people – with the collusion of UN staff. Investigations carried out later showed that more than 2,000 companies and individuals from over 40 countries had paid bribes or received kickbacks to participate in the programme. The investigations also showed that Annan's son Kojo might also have used his father's influence to win a contract to inspect oil-for-food shipments for the Swiss company Cotecna.

But Annan failed to look at the warning signs that indicated that all was not well with the programme. When in 2002 a UN database manager tried to alert high-ranking officials at the UN Secretariat in New York about what Saddam was doing, his contract was not renewed. Annan, on the other hand, did nothing. It was only later, when news of the scandal began emerging in the media, that he established the Paul Volcker commission to look into the allegations. But by then, the programme had already been terminated and the United States already had its boots on the ground in Iraq. So no one was tried or convicted for these crimes, though the main culprit, Saddam Hussein, had been captured and sentenced to death – but for other crimes he had committed against the Iraqi people.

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The invasion of Iraq by the United States and Britain in 2003 was another catastrophe that Annan failed to prevent. The George Bush administration went to war with Iraq without UN Security Council approval and without Annan's blessing. Though Annan did publicly declare that the war was "illegal", and expressed deep disappointment that the United States and Britain had decided to go to war with Iraq, there was not much else he could do. Thousands died and anarchy reigned in Iraq after Saddam was ousted. The people of Iraq are still picking up the pieces.

But then perhaps we assume that the position of UN Secretary-General is more powerful than it really is. The UN Secretary-General is not above presidents or UN member states. His job is to do what he can where he can without stepping on too many important toes. The biggest donor countries usually get their way, and those with veto powers in the UN Security Council wield most of the power. UN General Assembly resolutions do not amount to much as they are not legally-binding. UN Secretary-Generals who assume that they have the power to change the will of the world's richest and most powerful nations are considered extremely naïve or self-important – and are quickly sacrificed.

The last UN Secretary-General who tried to assert his independence on global issues found himself out of a job. Kofi Annan might never have become UN Secretary-General if his predecessor, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, had not become such a pain in the ass for the United States government. While he was extremely intelligent and well-read, Boutros-Ghali failed to

appreciate that his position was highly political and that no UN Secretary-General can get away with offending or opposing the wishes of the UN Security Council's five permanent members – the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China.

So when Boutros-Ghali refused to authorize NATO air strikes in Bosnia in 1994, the United States orchestrated a campaign to get rid of him. The Clinton administration felt that he was too arrogant and too strong-willed for the post and that he lacked the diplomatic skills required of the world's top diplomat – in other words, he was unwilling to play ball with the world's superpower. So he had to go.

The US government lobbied for the appointment of the more pliable Annan, who one US official described as “an extremely nuanced, extremely serious man with whom we agreed most of the time”. But Annan, a career civil servant who began and ended his career at the UN, was not completely untarnished. The Rwandan government blamed him for failing to prevent the 1994 genocide when he was head of the UN's peacekeeping operations. General Romeo Dallaire, the Canadian head of the UN peacekeeping mission in Rwanda when the killings began, blamed the UN Secretariat in New York and Annan in particular for ignoring his reports of a planned mass massacre of Tutsis and for denying him permission to raid various caches in Kigali where arms were being accumulated.

Annan had ordered Dallaire not to take sides as “it was up to the Rwandans to sort things out for themselves”. Dallaire blamed the UN for the calamity that befell Rwanda then, as did Rwandan President Paul Kagame, whose Rwandan Patriotic Front is credited for stopping the killings without UN or international support. When Annan decided to make an official apology to the people of Rwanda in May 1998, a year after he was appointed UN Secretary-General, no Rwandan official came to receive him at the airport in Kigali. Rwanda's foreign minister even publicly rebuked Annan for failing the people of Rwanda.

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Annan, as head of the Department of Peace Keeping Operations, and the Dutch peacekeeping troops deployed to the Balkans were also blamed for failing to prevent the 1995 massacre in Srebrenica of 8,000 Muslim men by Bosnian Serb forces. However, the Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers spoke out in defence of Annan, who was head of the UN's peacekeeping operations then, and the role of the UN's peace-keeping troops lay dormant for years. In 1997, three years after the Rwandan genocide and two years after the killings in Srebrenica, Annan was appointed UN Secretary-General.

Nonetheless, Kofi Annan will be remembered for making the UN more relevant in a world that had become cynical about its relevance. He rallied the world's governments around the Millennium Development Goals to halve poverty, disease and illiteracy and surrounded himself with intelligent and competent people who lent credibility to the institution. He saw the link between poverty and human rights and was a champion of sustainable development.

He was also a great advocate of evidence-based research and believed that the UN had a key role to play in producing and disseminating knowledge for development. I remember the former head of UN-Habitat, Anna Tibaijuka, telling me and other UN-Habitat staff that she had been instructed by Annan to produce quality reports on housing and urbanisation as this was one way the UN agency would gain legitimacy and credibility. (This led to the birth of *The State of the World's Cities* report, of

which I was the editor.)

Annan was not threatened by talented or competent people – a rare quality among UN bureaucrats. His most articulate spokesperson, Shashi Tharoor, could convince even the most diehard cynics that the UN had an important place in world politics and that the world was a better place because of it. For Africans, Annan represented the best the continent could offer, a shining example of African decency and humility.

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There is no doubt that Annan was a world leader with immense influence. But in the end, like all UN officials, he was constrained by the nature of his job, which meant that even if he wanted to, he had no power to shift the global power balance or to prevent wars. From Yemen to Iraq and Afghanistan, the world today is as tumultuous as it was when the UN was established after the Second World War – a testament to the inadequacies of an institution that has failed to live up to its main mandate of preventing “the scourge of war” because the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (who also happen to be the biggest arms manufacturers in the world) make the ultimate decisions on global security matters.