

The Work of QUNO in New York

by Jack T. Patterson and Lori Heninger

Since President George W. Bush's challenge to the United Nations on September 12, 2002, a day after the first anniversary of 9/11, to "disarm Iraq by force or do nothing and face catastrophe," the months that followed were at once frenetic, hopeful, and despairing. The majority on the Security Council was faced with two tasks that most believed could determine the fate of the Council. First, the Council had to be seen to enforce its own resolutions through the effective disarmament of Iraq; and second, it had to prevent a preemptive United States-led war on a member state that the overwhelming majority of nations believed was unnecessary and damaging to the UN Charter. The start of the war cut short the inspections then underway, but the Security Council had succeeded in steadfastly refusing to grant authority for the use of force and had engaged the world in serious deliberations for over eight months. In so doing, the Council had honored its commitments under the Charter even as it found itself sidelined during the war and threatened with further denigration of its authority in the postconflict period.

The UN, particularly the Security Council, has emerged deeply wounded, still split by a majority resistant to U.S. dominance of its affairs and to a U.S. seemingly determined to have its way on

all issues of consequence.

A watershed event or dam burst? It is too soon to predict the demise of an organization whose irrelevance has been predicted so many times in the past—only to rebound when next needed.

The staff at the Quaker United Nations Office have struggled mightily during these months to respond to the challenge of Iraq while at the same time maintaining progress on our other long-term commitments: reducing the illicit trade in small arms, increasing awareness about approaches to preventing violent conflict, drawing attention to the issue of water scarcity as a future source of war, and advocating for the ambitious Millennium Development Goals so critical to the alleviation of global poverty. Over the past five years, QUNO-NY has worked diligently to discern the focus of its work. After much worship and strategic planning, we have settled on two goals: the

New York office administered by American Friends Service Committee and the Geneva office by Quaker Peace and Social Witness in the United Kingdom. QUNO in New York has two facilities: a small office at 777 UN Plaza across the street from the UN, and Quaker House, an inconspicuous brownstone row house on 48th Street in Manhattan, not far away.

We are inspired in our work on behalf of Friends by the words of William Penn that "True godliness doesn't turn [us] out of the world, but enables [us] to live better in it, and excites [our] endeavors to mend it." At QUNO, we seek to mend the brokenness in the human community, of which war is the most extreme expression, by bringing what one of our Geneva colleagues calls "grease, heat, and light" into our interactions with diplomats, secretariat staff, and other NGOs working at the UN.

Just as sticky car doors, squeaky windows, and engines all need some form of lubricant to keep them running smoothly, we provide grease through our facilitation of discussions—often in the privacy of Quaker House—of difficult issues that block constructive deliberations within the UN. The art of facilitation makes easier the direct, frank sharing of views and real needs that moves beyond impasse and bolsters the political will to solve problems creatively.

When issues are deeply entangled, or when a great deal of information needs to be worked through on an issue, QUNO staff will develop and hold a larger residential meeting. These gatherings have been held around the world, but one of our favorite spots and a favorite of diplomats and UN staff is Mohonk Mountain House in New York State. It is close enough to UN headquarters to be reached in a morning, but far enough that diplomats are out of the public eye. We encourage them to bring their families (at their own expense) as it is harder to demonize someone who has a two-year-old at every meal and whom you see as a parent.

Examples of facilitation include the decades-long work of Friends in Washington and at the UN through the 1970s and 1980s that led to the enactment of the Convention on the Law of the Seas. More recently, QUNO played an important



prevention of violent conflict, and nonviolent alternatives to military intervention. We have moved all of our work—economic, environmental, and human rights—to relate to these goals.

Along with our sister office in Geneva, QUNO in New York follows events and issues at the UN, the World Trade Organization, the International Labor Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. For a combined program staff of ten, this is quite an undertaking. Both offices are credentialed at the UN as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) through Friends World Committee for Consultation, with the

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First page: Hugh Jenkins and Allen White with the brother of the Indian representative to the UN Security Council, 1950

Left: A gathering at Quaker House in 1958

Below: Current staff of QUNO in front of the Church Center for the UN, where their offices are located

Bottom: Two representatives of the World Bank, a professor from Oregon State University, and program assistant Anna Brown chat during a recent QUNO event on water as a source of cooperation.



Matt Heron/AFSC Archives

role in facilitating discussions over an eight-year period that led to the establishment of a Permanent UN Forum on Forests. One participating ambassador at the final QUNO colloquium held in Canada said, "We've just created a home for the forests in the UN," an exciting and fulfilling moment.

Recently, QUNO was asked on the spur of the moment to host a luncheon at Quaker House to help distrustful and increasingly deadlocked negotiators of a process leading up to the follow-up after a half decade on the World Summit on Social Development, called the WSSD +5—"just social, to get to know each other better with no business!" They arrived for lunch on a scorching day, and Quaker House had no air conditioning then. They proceeded to talk first about the chairman's intimate knowledge of Italian film, but then they moved quickly to talking about some of the most sensitive issues before them. The result, we were told later in the day, was to unstick the negotiations by getting some unaddressed concerns out on the table in a more trusting environment.

Just as hot water can thaw a frozen pipe, we bring heat through individual and corporate witness to issues. One of the most

common descriptions by diplomats of QUNO's work is that we are taken seriously because we approach discussions as a neutral party, but we do not interpret neutrality as indifference. We see it as being "passionately attached to all sides." Nor do we agree with everyone all the time—on the contrary, we hold firmly to the testimonies of Friends and they inform our thought on all issues. Still, we listen to everyone and encourage all to have their say, particularly those whose voices are often softer than others.

Diplomats seem generally to appreciate that our motive is to help them address their problems more than to advance our own agenda on an issue. They know we do this work out of a deep sense of the importance of addressing the world's problems, a deep caring for the people who make it happen, and that we are always clear on our position when asked—which is quite often. Recently a UN official said:

"What was remarkable about the Quaker organization was their unobtrusiveness, their desire to allow the dynamics of the meeting to take place, leading to a good result without trying to impose their own beliefs on those who are there. There was a certain transparency and an integrity about that process."

Examples of heat include bringing a small group of expatriate Hutu and Tutsi leaders together after the Rwandan genocide for a daylong facilitated exchange. Tension in the room at Quaker House was palpable, yet amazingly, at the end of the day, one of the Hutu leaders said, "You know, this is the first time in four years we've talked face to face. I can see your eyes and you can see mine and we have been talking to each other as human beings. We must not let this die." Another time Amanda Romero, a human rights activist based in Bogotá, Colombia and AFSC Quaker International Affairs Representative (QIAR), spoke on the human rights situation in Colombia to a room filled with diplomats, including the Colombian ambassador, and other activists. Amanda Romero spoke frankly and honestly about her experiences and the experiences of others. The reaction to her comments was quick and severe—some even suggested she was not a real Colombian to promote such lies outside the country. We stated that our goal was not so much to reach agreement—differences in experiences were too wide for that—but to achieve some understanding as part of a continuing discussion that ultimately would benefit all. Nonetheless, the ambassador left the meeting at its close in great haste and apparent anger. While we had not intended to confront the ambassador, we were glad to have facilitated an exchange of words about hard things that might not otherwise have happened. We quickly followed up that incident with phone calls and soon after worked supportively with staff of that mission on the issue of small arms trade—which they chaired. We do not always expect a smooth result, but we always try to be fair to all concerned.

"It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness," holds deep truth. The



light of a candle pushes back the darkness and allows us to see; moreover, the act of lighting the candle is in itself a way of banishing the darkness, moving from inertia to action. QUNO has been a leader in many issues before the UN, introducing ideas and providing a space for joint thinking about problems beyond traditional give-and-take negotiating.

Over the past few years, QUNO has begun to undertake its own research to develop new information and raise the level of the discourse on an issue. Our recent work on the experiences of girl child soldiers is an example of this. While much has been said about boys and young men in conflict situations and demobilization at war's end, little attention has been given to the experiences of adolescent women or children who often face a myriad of different obstacles to reintegration. Both QUNO offices, in collaboration with Dr. Von Keairns of Pittsburgh (Pa.) Meeting as principal investigator, undertook a study to get the story of girls' lives and their demobilization and reintegration needs in their own words. This is the first study of its kind; the executive summary was released in October 2002 and the country-specific studies in the summer of 2003.

In another research project, a QUNO staff member is following a lead to lift up the issue of fresh water as a potential source of conflict and war in the century ahead. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has suggested water might be the major cause of war in coming years. We approached the issue differently—not so much looking at war as the occasion of conflict and violence, but at water as a potential source of cooperation. Through meetings at Quaker House and at UN headquarters, we have brought together research findings that confirm what we had suspected: that transboundary water disputes have been resolved cooperatively far more often than through violence and offer impressive models for the successful resolution of other difficult or even explosive issues. It turns conventional wisdom in the UN upside down and has opened the way for fresh thinking about, and beyond, water issues.

QUNO staff are also working on a literature review/interview book on the potential relationship between poverty and violent conflict. This work is being done in collaboration with Dr. Michael Snarr of Wilmington College in Ohio and should be ready in 2004.

In all this work we seek to bring "grease, heat, and light" to the task of mending the world's brokenness. The watershed events that fed up to war in Iraq, we believe, may yet move us toward the vision so ably described by Kofi Annan just months before 9/11/01 and the responses to it dampened so much of the world's confidence that peaceful goals are attainable. Kofi Annan spoke then of the currents he sensed building worldwide and advocated the need for peacebuilding and for the prevention of violent conflict. Single-cause explanations of armed conflict were "too simplistic." He argued, "An awareness of growing dangers in the new century might help us consider fundamental changes in our relations with groups beyond our own and accept the mutual benefit that can be gained through political accommodation, respect for the diversity and the active promotion of social justice. . . . It might enable us to at last move beyond the ancient habits of blaming, dehumanizing, repressing, and attacking 'the other side.'" We at QUNO hope to continue our work with this eloquent and prescient appeal in our hearts for fresh approaches to solving global problems. □

Quaker House at the United Nations

by Lori Heninger

Imagine you are in the living room of your home. Now imagine the same scene, except that in addition to you, the room is filled with diplomats from around the world who represent their countries at the United Nations. I don't have to imagine this—I see it on a regular basis in the living room of Quaker House in New York City. But it's not only diplomats that come. Representatives of non-governmental organizations, staff of the UN Secretariat, people from the private sector, and representatives of First Nations also come to meet, gather information, and discuss issues before the UN, right there in our living room.

I live with Jack Patterson, my husband and co-director of the Quaker United Nations Office in New York, along with our daughter, two dogs, and a cat, in Quaker House, a four-story brownstone in the heart of the district known as "Turtle Bay." Quaker House is a short walk from

the Quaker UN Office—located directly across the street from the UN—but far enough to be out of the public eye and to allow for a break from the formal atmosphere of the UN.

Over 50 years ago, Quakers began their work at the UN from an apartment near the UN buildings. In 1953, a small group of donors got together to determine how to create a permanent Quaker presence at the UN, and the result was Quaker House. A small brass plaque identifies the building, which is almost indistinguishable from the other row houses on the block.

The first floor of the house holds a small office, an accessible bathroom, an elevator, and an apartment used to house visiting Friends who are doing work at the UN. The second floor is the main program floor that includes a living room, dining room, and kitchen. The third and fourth floors are our living space. In back of the house is a beautiful communal garden that stretches

the length of the block from 2nd to 3rd Avenues.

E.B. White, a former resident of the block, set his famous children's story, *Stuart Little*, in the garden behind Quaker House. In 1949 he wrote a prophetic book, *Here is New York*, on war coming to the United States and to New York in particular:

The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions. The intimation of mortality is part of New York now; in the sounds of jets overhead, in the black headlines of the latest editions.

All dwellers in cities must live with the stubborn fact of annihilation; in New York the fact is somewhat more concentrated because of the concentration of the city itself, and because, of all targets, New York has a certain clear priority. In the mind of whatever perverted dreamer

might loose the lightning, New York must hold a steady, irresistible charm.

As the World Trade Center towers fell in 2001 and the subways, bridges, and tunnels closed, the staff of QUNO gathered in the living room of Quaker House to comfort one another and to watch the unfolding horror. Being together in a place of peace was a great comfort to us all in those hours.

Quaker House is used for meetings by the staff of the Quaker UN Office; these meetings usually take place during the lunch hours of the UN, between one and three. At a normal diplomatic luncheon meeting at the UN people sit around tables, food is served in a very formal manner, and people talk. We are looking for more than this; we want people to get to know one another on a personal level. We ask people to come to the buffet table and get their own lunches. They sit on chairs or couches and juggle their plates on their laps or eat from TV trays. Perhaps they don't know the person they are sitting next to because there are no preassigned seats, and so they strike up a conversation. Food is always vegetarian and nondairy to meet the diverse dietary needs of the participants, and it is always delicious—food is a great lubricant of the wheels of conversation.

A brief presentation usually begins the discussion, and then people talk about the subject at hand, not from a prepared document, but as human beings representing their countries. We know that we are getting somewhere in the negotiating process when we hear guests say, "Well, this is my personal opinion, but . . ." or, "Maybe I shouldn't say this, but . . ." or, "We couldn't talk about this on the floor of



the UN." Conversation begins to loosen up. People begin to see one another as human beings instead of solely as representatives of countries, and relationships develop. From relationships, genuine dialogue can emerge.

One of the most important things we do at QUNO is to build relationships. This means a lot of behind-the-scenes work, meeting with individuals before we bring them together at Quaker House. Quakers Sam and Muriel Levering worked for 20 years to create and negotiate the Law of the Seas Treaty, and much of this work was done in small meetings around the Quaker House dining room table. In 1957, Quaker House provided a venue for

white South African diplomats to meet with diplomats from black African countries. After the death of Dag Hammarskjold, QUNO was invited to organize a private meeting of ambassadors to discuss the appointment of a new Secretary-General for the UN. Quaker House was the site of organizational meetings for the first NGO Forum during a world conference on the Environment held in Rio. Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu, Guatemalan human rights activist, addressed diplomats in Quaker House in 1986. Critical breakthroughs were made on the conference platform for the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing during a lunch meeting at the house. More recently, a launch for the study "The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers" was held with diplomats, NGOs, and the media attending. The first meeting of the Planning Bureau for the Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development took place at Quaker House, as did meetings leading up to Secretary-General Kofi Annan's report on Conflict Prevention.

History has been made inside the walls of Quaker House, and if we, the staff of QUNO, have anything to say about it, this pattern will continue. We often remind ourselves that we stand on the shoulders of giants—the representatives who have come before us and have paved the road to the UN. Quaker House is truly a treasure that the Quaker community holds. Jack and I have been, and continue to be, extremely fortunate to represent Friends in this way, and we are blessed to reside in a home dedicated to peace and built on the foundation of the testimonies of Quakerism. □

About Wider Quaker Fellowship

Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas, works to facilitate loving understanding of diversities among Friends while we discover together, with God's help, our common spiritual ground, and to facilitate full expression of our Friends testimonies in the world. Friends World Committee's Wider Quaker Fellowship program is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages, and Quaker traditions, and we invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP

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