The UN’s Failure to Live up to Its Charter’s Ideals

June 29, 2015

By Joseph A. Klein

Canada Free Press

http://canadafreepress.com/article/73276

The United Nations celebrated the 70th anniversary of the signing of the UN Charter on June 26th. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon called the UN Charter “an expression of hope.” Commemorating the signing of the UN Charter at its birthplace in San Francisco, the Secretary General added that the Charter “symbolizes the hope and aspirations that we can bring the world as it is a little closer to the world as it should be. This we can do through cooperation, dialogue, peaceful settlement of disputes and respect of human rights.”

However, moral clarity and truth are the sine qua non of even beginning on the path to achieving such aspirations. Especially when it comes to the Middle East, moral clarity and truth are in short supply at the United Nations.

On the same day that UN officials were extolling the UN’s accomplishments in commemoration of the anniversary of the UN Charter signing, members of the Security Council were confronted with the deadly consequences of UN inaction in Syria. It has been more than a year since the Security Council unanimously passed a resolution demanding that the Syrian regime immediately stop the use of deadly barrel bombs dropped indiscriminately from helicopters on the civilian population, that all parties allow delivery of humanitarian assistance and that they cease depriving civilians of food and medicine indispensable to their survival. The resolution is not worth the paper it is written on as conditions in Syria have grown considerably worse.

On June 26th, Security Council members heard first-hand accounts about the bloodcurdling impact of barrel bombs on civilian victims from Bassam Alahmad of the Violations Documentation Center, Nadim Houry of Human Rights Watch, and Raed Saleh of Syria Civil Defense.

Since the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2139 in February 2014 explicitly banning the indiscriminate use of barrel bombs, 3831 civilians were killed by barrel bombs alone, according to the Violations Documentation Center. This fatality total includes 1042 children and 569 women. The bombings have intensified in the last year. May 2015 was the deadliest month of the Syrian conflict, with barrel bombs causing the most civilian casualties.

There have been countless UN meetings, condemnatory statements, pleas for humanitarian relief and failed attempts by three successive UN envoys to broker a political settlement in Syria. However, words are no substitute for action. Russian and Chinese vetoes and threats of vetoes have crippled the Security Council’s ability to impose such measures as sanctions, a no-fly zone, a total arms embargo or referral of the Syrian situation to the International Criminal Court. In any event, the expansion of ISIS in Syrian and Iraqi territories has muddied the waters in terms of accountability for the most horrific crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in those territories as well as further complicating the provision of humanitarian aid to civilians trapped there.

UN Truth Telling

Vetoes may prevent the Security Council from taking effective action. But vetoes do not prevent the UN from telling the truth in documents issued in its name.

Nevertheless, in the UN Secretary General’s recently issued Children and Armed Conflict report, the Syrian regime was falsely made to appear as posing less of a danger to children’s lives than Israel. The report distorted a comparison of the number of children killed in Syria during 2014 relative to the number of Palestinian children alleged to have been killed in Gaza. The report put the number of Palestinian children killed in Gaza at 557. It put the number of Syrian children killed at 368, less than half of the amount of child fatalities in Syria from barrel bombs alone since February 2014 as reported by the Violations Documentation Center.

The Palestinian figure used by the Secretary General’s report is based at least in part on slanted figures supplied by local Gaza officials – i.e., Hamas. At the same time, the lower Syrian figure was published as if it were an established fact, even though the Secretary General’s Deputy Spokesperson conceded in response to questioning that there was a “lack of first-hand information” and that the report’s total of Syrian children killed “was in all likelihood an undercount.” By contrast, the Violations Documentation Center painstakingly gathered evidence based on what it described as “numerous interviews conducted with survivors of barrel bomb attacks, including media professionals and reporters, doctors, civil defense workers and defectors of the Syrian Air Forces.”

Yet the UN used its own admittedly unreliable “undercount” to give the false impression that Israel caused more deaths of Palestinian children in Gaza than the number of children killed in Syria during a comparable period of time.

 Even worse, the United Nations has deliberately chosen to make Israel its number one human rights villain, thereby giving the Assad regime the pretext to argue that it is not so bad by comparison. When Syria has received criticism, it has been watered down at the urging of Russia and China.

The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has condemned Israel more times than all of the other 192 member states combined. The total number of UNHRC condemnations of Israel from the UNHRC’s inception in 2006 through 2015 so far is 61, as compared to 15 for Syria.

During the current session of the Human Rights Council, its members are considering a report issued by its commission of inquiry concerning last year’s war in Gaza. While purporting to be a balanced assessment of alleged violations of international law by both sides to the conflict, Israel is the primary target. The report fails to mention the refusal by Hamas to accept the terms of a ceasefire proposed by Egypt before Israel launched its ground operation. Israel accepted that ceasefire proposal which, if Hamas had also accepted, would have saved the lives of at least 80 percent of the Palestinian children reportedly killed during the Gaza war. The report minimized the fact that Hamas used civilians as human shields and deliberately stored weapons in schools, homes, hospitals and mosques where they knew civilians were likely to be. It played down the Israeli military’s extraordinary efforts to warn civilians in advance of impending attacks on facilities that Hamas was using as launching pads from which to fire rockets at Israeli population centers and from which they were building their terrorist tunnels to sneak their fighters into Israel for the purpose of killing Israeli civilians.

Israel did not start the Gaza war. It did not set out to deliberately target Palestinian civilians for death, as Hamas was doing in deliberately launching its thousands of indiscriminate rocket attacks against Israeli civilian population centers. Israel sought to minimize civilian casualties by using precision weapons aimed at targets which its best intelligence had identified as serving a military purpose, and deploying ground troops as a last resort only after Hamas refused to enter into a ceasefire.

Even in the midst of the Gaza war, Israel made sure that humanitarian relief was delivered to people in need in Gaza. Despite the constant rocket fire into Israel during Operation Protective Edge, the Kerem Shalom crossing remained open, providing food and essential supplies for the residents of Gaza. Israel also offered medical assistance to wounded Palestinian civilians while the war was still going on. One field hospital alone set up by Israel on the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip treated more than 50 people, among whom were women, children and the elderly. This humanitarian outreach took place despite efforts by Hamas to dissuade Gazans in urgent need of care from visiting the facility. The UN reports dealing with the Gaza war have ignored all this and sought to cast blame on Israel for Palestinian civilian casualties caused by Hamas’s own actions and intransigence.

As described above, the Syrian regime’s deliberate use of barrel bombs dropped indiscriminately on civilian populations, including some loaded with poisonous chlorine gas, is in stark contrast to Israel’s efforts to minimize civilian casualties in a war that Israel did not start. The Syrian regime and its adversaries, particularly ISIS, have blocked humanitarian relief to besieged civilians, including women and children. Medical units using the Red Cross or Red Crescent emblem have been targeted. Palestinian refugees in Yarmouk were among the victims of such blatant war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law. Nearly 200 people are believed to have died in Yarmouk in 2014 due to hunger alone as a result of the siege imposed by the Assad regime that has also blocked water supplies.

Yet the UN Human Rights Council treats Israel as a worse violator of international law than the Syrian regime. The Secretary General’s Children and Armed Conflict report undercounted the number of children killed in Syria while relying in part on Hamas-supplied figures in its estimation of the number of Palestinian children killed in Gaza. And the International Criminal Court has launched a preliminary investigation of the war in Gaza while repeated requests to refer the Syrian conflict to the International Criminal Court have stalled in the Security Council.

In closing his remarks at the anniversary celebration of the UN Charter’s signing, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said that “The Charter is our compass.” Too often today, the UN has lost its way, as so vividly illustrated by the moral equivalence, if not worse, it applies to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the massacres in Syria.