**Hot Tips on UN Waste, Fraud and Abuse: U.S. Mission Posts Scores of UN Internal Reports**

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Hot tip for any reporters interested in newly disclosed documents on waste, fraud and abuse at the United Nations:

Just days after I queried the U.S. Mission to the UN about its commitment to UN transparency (Paging Ambassador [1]Susan Rice), the Mission finally posted on its web site more than more than 130 previously secret UN internal audit reports. The UN, for all its endless promises about transparency and its ample enjoyment of other people’s money, does not release these reports to the public. It is only thanks to the U.S. that they are now seeing daylight at all — though it takes some trolling through the Mission’s web site to find them.

For anyone who cares about even minimal integrity in UN management and handling of taxpayer money, there’s a trove of bombshell material here. Together, the reports total hundreds of pages, but the typical report runs about 10-20 pages. They date from Oct., 2008 through August, 2009.

Here’s a link to the U.S. Mission’s web page on UN Oversight and Transparency with the main links [2], and here are direct links to the newly posted and until-now confidential internal audit reports from 2008 [3] and 2009 [4].

Pick your subject and dive in, whether it’s a summary of the “higher risks” due to “the lack of an appropriate structure” for the UN’s own Ethics Office [5], or a report on the dire derelictions of reporting and accountability dogging the plump trust funds of the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [6](OCHA). Specifically set up to better coordinate aid, OCHA features in a Nov. 2008 audit report as handling trust funds with a throughput of hundreds of millions of dollars, but not bothering to produce any consolidated statement of cash flow. OCHA also had “little discernable linkage” between strategic planning and “the measurement and reporting of actual performance.”

For those interested in the UN’s climate bureaucracy, check out the July, 2009 report on the slop of the UNFCCC [7]Secretariat’s conference management, with its multi-year delays in accounting for funds. Or delve into the Dec., 2008 report on the UNFCCC’s Clean Development Mechanism [7], where the governance was found “not adequate to mitigate reputational and other risks,” and the executive board “due to lack of time” had neglected to adopt any code of conduct whatsoever to address such corrosive problems as conflicts of interest.

Or, in the realms of UN peacekeeping, with its more than $8 billion annual budget, for which U.S. taxpayers alone fork out roughly $2 billion per year, check out the UN’s nearly $1 billion annual program for peacekeeping air operations [8]. In an August, 2009 report, the UN’s own internal auditors noted that participation by senior management was “inadequate,” current staffing levels were “insufficient,” time of effective bidding on air charter services was “insufficient,” provisions in air charter agreements were “unclear” and some vendor registration was “improper.”

It takes a certain amount of determination to slog through the UN jargon, in which an executive summary of “not adequate” is often code for outright abuse or screaming failure, if you slog on to the details of the report. But in these reports, which cover only a sampling of the UN’s sprawling global system, the problems roll on and on. In corners that rarely receive attention from the media, they range from poorly documented lump-sum handling of noncompetitively-sourced travel arrangements for the UN mission in East Timor (UNMIT [9]), to the UN’s disregard of its own rules in choosing a director for the UN Centre for Regional Development (UNCRD [10]), headquartered in Japan.

It ought to be reassuring that at least the UN’s internal auditors are tracking some of this mess. But at the UN, it is one thing to have internal auditors flag a problem, and quite another to see the UN genuinely fix it. For instance, at the UN Mission to Cyprus (UNFICYP), where a growing web of UN scandals [11]a few years ago led to fervent UN promises of reform, one of the audits just disclosed by the U.S. Mission, dated August, 2009, suggests that oddities lingered in such areas as “no competitive bidding” on commercial travel for contingents of Argentine peacekeepers, and “inefficient accounting of food rations.” (Here’s a look back at questions in 2005, then surrounding UNFICYP food rations [12]).

For Washington to get any traction on pulling the UN out of its own administrative muck takes a lot of backbone and focused effort. But if the U.S. is to rely on the UN in any way, as President Barack Obama wishes to do, then the only course for minimizing chances of being tainted with the next colossal UN management scandal is for the U.S. to push hard, visibly and constantly for the UN to clean up its own house.

Credit Ambassador Susan Rice that the U.S. Mission to the UN has finally released these UN internal audit reports, even if for some reason it took well over a year to get around to it. (I can’t claim credit for prompting these postings with my story last week, though it would be nice to believe the U.S. Mission is that responsive to criticism. Let us assume it was merely glad coincidence that I queried the Mission on the whereabouts of these reports just 72 hours or so before they were suddenly released in bulk on the Mission web site).

A quick bit of history here: When the Oil-for-Food scandal broke bigtime in 2004, the UN refused to release its internal audits of the program even to governments of member states, including its chief donor, the U.S. After a showdown with congressional investigators, the internal audits were finally tipped out in early 2005, via the UN inquiry led by Paul Volcker. They provided damning insights into UN administrative abuses and derelictions that helped feed the gusher of Oil-for-Food corruption. Those reports might have been useful in heading off the damage of that UN blowout, had they been released to the public as they were produced, instead of being exposed later as an embarrasing piece of the UN’s self-serving cover-up.

In the aftermath of those disclosures, the U.S. Mission under the previous administration began obtaining UN internal audit reports and posting them on its UN reform section of its web site. That’s the third link on the Mission’s current main page for Oversight and Transparency, OIOS Reports Archive [13] , which runs up to Sept., 2008, and until the end of last week was the most recent information available.

For any current attempt to patrol the UN administrative habits, the next questions are: Where are the audits so far from 2010? When will the U.S. Mission post those? And when will the White House fill the important post at the U.S. Mission of Ambassador for Management and Reform? Since Obama took office, that slot has been left to an acting envoy, Obama’s nominee last year having flamed out over questions involving his own issues of management.

The Obama administration’s welcome decision to release the massive backlog of 2009 and late 2008 UN internal audits will only help if people actually read them, distill the information within, and U.S. authorities act by strongly pressuring the UN to clean up its endlessly proliferating mess — which in recent times has had virtually no oversight. The jury’s out. Meanwhile, here’s that link again, to scores of windows [2]on UN management — or too often, mismanagement. It’s a start.

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