

The United Nations Turns Eighty: The Thirty-Sixth Newsletter (2025)



Per Krohg (Norway), *Untitled (Mural for Peace)*, 1952.

Dear friends,

Greetings from the desk of **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.

There is only one treaty in the world that, despite its limitations, binds nations together: the United Nations Charter. Representatives of fifty nations wrote and ratified the UN Charter in 1945, with others joining in the years that followed. The charter itself only sets the terms for the behaviour of nations. It does not and cannot create a new world. It depends on individual nations to either live by the charter or die without it.

The charter remains incomplete. It needed a Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and even that was contested as political and civil rights had to eventually be separated from the social and economic rights.

Deep rifts in political visions created fissures in the UN system that have kept it from effectively addressing problems in the world.

The UN is now eighty. It is a miracle that it has lasted this long. The League of Nations was founded in 1920 and lasted only eighteen years of relative peace (until World War II began in China in 1937).



Rufino Tamayo (Mexico), *La Fraternidad* (Brotherhood), 1968.

The UN is only as strong as the community of nations that comprises it. If the community is weak, then the UN is weak. As an independent body, it cannot be expected to fly in like an angel and whisper into the ears of the belligerents and stop them. The UN can only blow the whistle, an umpire for a game whose rules are routinely broken by the more powerful states. It offers a convenient punching bag for all sides of the political spectrum: it is blamed if crises are not solved and if relief efforts fall short. Can the UN stop the Israeli genocide in Gaza? UN officials have made strong statements during the genocide, with Secretary General António Guterres saying **that** ‘Gaza is a killing field – and civilians are in an endless death loop’ (8 April 2025) and **that** the famine in Gaza is ‘not a mystery – it is a man-made disaster, a moral indictment, and a failure of humanity itself’ (22 August 2025). These are powerful words, but they have amounted to nothing, calling into question the efficacy of the UN itself.



Candido Portinari (Brazil), *Guerra e Paz (Guerra)* (War and Peace: War), 1952.

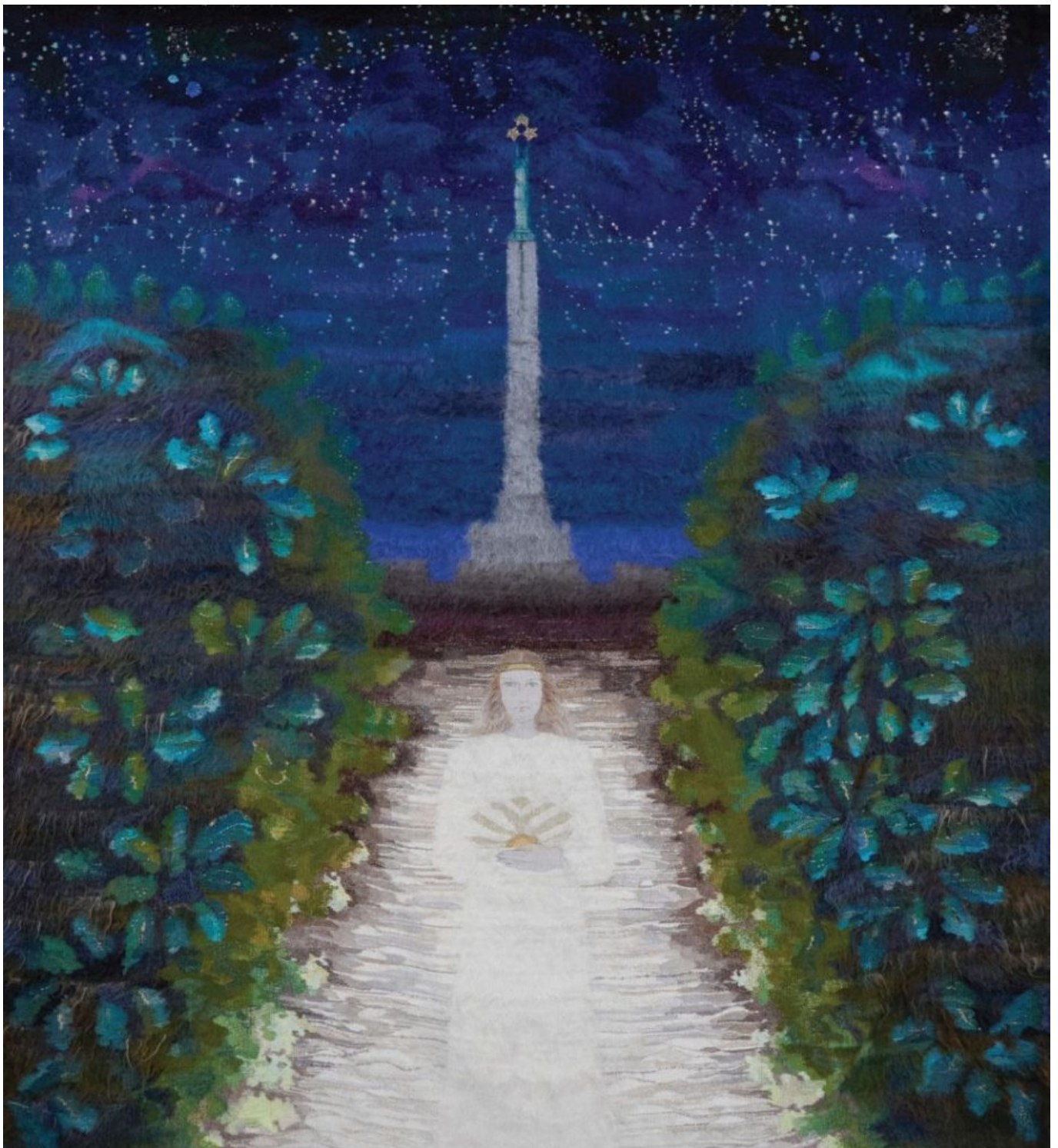
The UN is not one body but two halves. The most public face of the UN is the UN Security Council (UNSC), which has come to stand in as its executive arm. The UNSC is made up of fifteen countries: five are permanent members (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and the others are elected for two-year terms. The five permanent members (the P5) hold veto power over the decisions of the council. If one of the P5 does not like a decision, they are able to scuttle it with their veto. Each time the UNSC has been presented with a resolution calling for a ceasefire, the United States has exercised its veto to quash even that tepid measure (since 1972, the United States has **vetoed** more than forty-five UNSC resolutions about the Israeli occupation of Palestine). The UNSC stands in for the UN General Assembly (UNGA), whose one hundred and ninety-three members can pass resolutions that try to set the tone for world opinion but are often ignored. Since the start of the genocide, for instance, the UNGA has passed five key resolutions calling for a ceasefire (the first in October 2023 and the **fifth** in June 2025). But the UNGA has no real power in the UN system.



Candido Portinari (Brazil), *Guerra e Paz (Paz)* (War and Peace: Peace), 1957.

The other half of the UN is its myriad agencies, each set up to deal with this or that crisis of the modern age. Some predate the UN itself, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which was created in 1919 and brought into the UN system in 1946 as its first specialised agency. Others would follow, including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), which advocates for the rights of children, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which promotes tolerance and respect for the world's cultures. Over the decades, agencies have been created to advocate for and provide relief to refugees, to ensure nuclear energy is used for peace rather than war, to improve global

telecommunications, and to expand development assistance. Their remit is impressive, although the outcomes are more modest. Meagre funding from the world's states is one limitation (in 2022, the UN's total **expenditure** was \$67.5 billion, compared with over \$2 trillion **spent** on the arms trade). This chronic underfunding is largely because the world's powers disagree over the direction of the UN and its agencies. Yet without them, the suffering in the world would neither be recorded nor addressed. The UN system has become the world's humanitarian organisation largely because neoliberal austerity and war have destroyed the capacity of most individual countries to do this work themselves, and because non-governmental organisations are too small to meaningfully fill in the gap.



Edīte Pauls-Vīgnere (Latvia), *Hope*, 1994.

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the entire balance of the world system changed and the UN went into a cycle of internal reform initiatives: from Boutros Boutros-Ghali's *An Agenda for Peace* (1992) and *An Agenda for Development* (1994) and Kofi Annan's *Renewing the United Nations* (1997) to Guterres' *Our Common Agenda* (2021), *Summit of the Future* (2024), and *UN80 Task Force* (2025). The UN80 Task Force is the deepest reform imagined, but its three areas of interest (internal efficiency, mandate review, and programme alignment) have been attempted previously ('we've tried this exercise before', said Under-Secretary-General for Policy and Chair of the UN80 Task Force Guy Ryder). The agenda set by the UN is focused on its own organisational weaknesses and does not address the largely political questions that scuttle the UN's work. A broader agenda would need to include the following points:

1. **Move the UN Secretariat to the Global South.** Almost all UN agencies are headquartered in either Europe or the United States, where the UN Secretariat itself is located. There have been occasional proposals to move UNICEF, the UN Population Fund, and UN Women to Nairobi, Kenya, which already hosts the **UN Environment Programme** and **UN-Habitat**. It is about time that the UN Secretariat leave New York and go to the Global South, not least to prevent Washington from using visa denials to punish UN officials who criticise US or Israeli power. With the US preventing Palestinian officials from entering the US for the UN General Assembly, there have been calls already to move the UNGA meeting to Geneva. Why not permanently leave the United States?
2. **Increase funding to the UN from the Global South.** Currently, the largest funders of the UN system are the United States (22%) and China (20%), with seven close US allies contributing 28% (Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Canada, and South Korea). The Global South – without China – contributes about 26% to the UN budget; with China, its contribution is 46%, nearly half of the total budget. It is time for China to become the largest contributor to the UN, surpassing the US, which wields its funding as a weapon against the organisation.
3. **Increase funding for humanitarianism within states.** Countries should be spending more on alleviating human distress than on paying off wealthy bondholders. The UN should not be the main agency to assist those in need. As we have **shown**, several countries on the African continent spend more servicing debt than on education and healthcare; unable to provide these essential functions, they come to rely on the UN through UNICEF, UNESCO, and the WHO. States should build up their own capacity rather than depend on this assistance.
4. **Cut the global arms trade.** Wars are waged not only for domination but for the profits of arms dealers. Annual international arms exports are **nearing** \$150 billion, with the United States and Western European countries **accounting** for 73% of sales between 2020 and 2024. In 2023 alone, the top one hundred arms manufacturers **made** \$632 billion (largely through sales by US companies to the US military). Meanwhile, the total UN peacekeeping **budget** is only \$5.6 billion, and 92% of the peacekeepers come from the Global South. The Global North makes money on war, while the Global South sends its soldiers and policemen to try and prevent conflicts.

5. **Strengthen regional peace and development structures.** To disperse some of the power from the UNSC, regional peace and development structures such as the African Union must be strengthened and their views given priority. If there are no permanent members in the UNSC from Africa, the Arab world, or from Latin America, why should these regions be held captive by the veto wielded by the P5? If the power to settle disputes were to rest more in regional structures, then the absolute authority of the UNSC could be somewhat diluted.



Mimmo Rotella (Italy), *Pax* (Peace), 2004.

With the genocide unrelenting, another wave of boats filled with solidarity activists – the Freedom Flotilla – attempts to reach Gaza. On one of the boats is Ayoub Habraoui, a member of Morocco’s Workers’ Democratic Way Party who represents the International Peoples’ Assembly. He sent me this message:

What is happening in Gaza is not a conventional war – it is a slow-motion genocide unfolding before the eyes of the world. I am joining because deliberate starvation is being used as a weapon to break the will of a defenceless people – denied medicine, food, and water, while children die in their mothers’ arms. I am joining because humanity is indivisible. Whoever accepts a siege today will accept injustice anywhere tomorrow. Silence is complicity in the

crime, and indifference is a betrayal of the very values we claim to uphold. This flotilla is more than just boats – it is a global cry of conscience that declares: no to the siege of entire populations, no to starving the innocent, no to genocide. We may be stopped, but the very act of sailing is a declaration: Gaza is not alone. We are all witnesses to the truth – and voices against slow death.

Warmly,

Vijay