

# THE RESILIENCY OF THE UN STAFF MEMBER'S OATH OF OFFICE

This is not the first time that I have been asked how we can succeed in advancing the values of the United Nations in the most critical situations. It is a good question. Even those who have served in peace missions for over thirty years cannot provide a single answer to this question.

In retrospect, the most striking example that implied the spirit of service and self-denial was recorded at the beginning of the 90s, during the grueling negotiations for the liberation of Western hostages in Lebanon.



The

operation above required an extraordinary personal commitment from the “United Nations chief hostage negotiator” Giandomenico Picco, who conducted it in the utmost secrecy. For 18 long months he exposed himself to considerable risks as kidnapped persons were freed in a trickle. The envoy of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Terry Waite, prior to Picco, was kidnapped at that time. A mediation on thin ice and full of unknowns that for Giandomenico Picco involved numerous trips blindfolded and crouched in the trunk to reach secret locations in Beirut in the middle of the night.

It has been said that Giandomenico Picco, being a protagonist of other annals of UN history - from the Iran-Iraq ceasefire to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan - had a pact with the Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar. This alleged pact involved not informing the Secretary-General of high-risk situations, with an aim to avoid obliging him to ask Picco to abort mission.

An absolute trusting relationship between Pérez de Cuéllar and his right-hand man from Friuli (a region of Italy) - not always easy to develop - was key for these unthinkable operations. However, we are referring to facts that happened 30 years ago, when the undoubted respect for an international official, especially an official of the UN, was considerable. This brought greater freedom of movement and the power of initiative.

Many other lesser-known UN officials have made a difference in what are often called forgotten crises. Naming them and describing their accomplishments would require a lot of time.

I joined the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in the early 90s in Bosnia. UNPROFOR was initially an interim arrangement, aiming to create the conditions of peace and security for the negotiation of an overall settlement of the Yugoslav crisis.

During that time, I remembered how even a young official could decide to go and assist (and even save) people in difficulty at his/her own risk and guided only by conscience. In light of there being many needy people in Sarajevo under siege and in many other parts of the country, it is debatable if all the members of the mission have always given their best effort.

The case for me, however, has not always been akin to that of other UN members. How many times

in retrospect did we recriminate idle, weak behaviors? The UN official, although often being imagined as a protector of vulnerable groups and associated to the blue helmets, is basically an employee, a bureaucrat, an international bureaucrat. In short, still a bureaucrat. He/she is the one who did not need to take his/her life at risk at every step. He/she is the one who must respect the rules of the organization and its hierarchical structure.

A bold move, though heartfelt, can sometimes seriously embarrass the Organization and other relevant ongoing initiatives. Therefore, it is understandable that, in certain circumstances, a UN staff member must operate with caution, a behavior that may seem shy, if not apathetic. Hence, it could happen that a UN official may end up discontending all. The journalist Andrea Nicastro rightly defined a UN staff member as "A peacekeeper: always between two fires" years ago.

Having said all this, which results from decades spent in crisis areas; a fundamental point remains for the UN staff member: the Oath of Office that reads as follows:

"I solemnly declare and promise to exercise in all loyalty, discretion and conscience the functions entrusted to me as an international civil servant of the United Nations, to discharge these functions and regulate my conduct with the interests of the United Nations only in view, and not to seek or accept instructions in regard to the performance of my duties from any Government or other source external to the Organization".<sup>[1]</sup> This is the North Star that must always guide us through events and which does not allow for compromises.

I, like many others, probably did not always act as we should have or we could have, but certainly I never support any national strategies that are contrary to the UN guidelines and my conscience. The episodes of opposition with representatives of Member States (including representatives of my own country) were not lacking. I never regretted following the "UN Oath of Office" in conjunction with my judgment.

In conclusion, I propose a few thoughts on the current reality. As what I have always said to young people leaving for a mission: "Be aware of the fact that everything is more difficult and even frustrating nowadays." The lack of respect for the United Nations flag along with the consequent risk of kidnappings or attacks have reduced room for maneuverability for those on the front lines. The UN, as well as other international organizations and many NGOs, has imposed very stringent measures regarding the movements of its operators. In addition, there are new technologies including mobile telephone, email, and social networks.

All tools that undoubtedly increase the scope of a humanitarian operator. However, it is still a wishful thinking to believe that they can replace direct contacts with people in need. It happened to me in the last few years, too, and that's why I don't envy those who starts the profession now.

Can we therefore succeed today in advancing the values of the United Nations in the most difficult situations? It is possible, although it will be substantially more difficult than before due to the aforementioned reasons. The universal values that has been fighting for over the centuries cannot fade.

The Author

Andrea Angeli joined the United Nations contingents in Namibia, Cambodia, East Timor and the Former Yugoslavia, where he served for fifteen years. He also worked for the United Nations in Santiago de Chile during the last phase of the military regime and served in Baghdad when Iraq was under Saddam Hussein. He worked in New York as Assistant to Bettino Craxi Special Envoy for the Foreign Debt. He was the spokesperson for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Albania, for the Coalition Authority in Nassiriyah and for the European Union in Afghanistan. He was close associate of Staffan de Mistura, Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs in the Italian cabinet headed by Mario Monti. In 2014 he returned to Afghanistan as political adviser to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Herat, a position which he later held in the Kfor mission of NATO in Pristina. He is currently working for the OSCE Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Status, basic rights and duties of United Nations staff members. ST/SGB/2016/9. 21 July 2016.