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Book Reviews

What good is the UN ?

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In each of its members, every community possesses the potential to be brave, selfless and visionary, cowardly, blind, and venal, and the United Nations is no different.

And, like most members of most societies, UN states like to look after their own interests and to get their own way. Inside the UN, however, they are expected to make collective decisions. So they usually agree on the lowest common denominator of an issue and do the bare minimum to solve a problem, unless it directly affects their own political, economic and military goals.

The most common result of this process, as in most spheres of human effort, is mediocrity. And when mediocrity infects the world's moral and practical response to the extraordinary threat of genocide, then many, many people can be murdered with impunity.

In *Complicity With Evil: The United Nations in the Age of Modern Genocide* Adam LeBor examines the world's failure to stop genocide during the 1992-1995 Bosnian war, in Rwanda in 1994, and right now in the Sudanese region of Darfur.

Those failures, he finds, stem from the UN's inability to defend the towering principles that it claims to uphold, and the tendency of its member-states, institutions and employees to protect themselves while finding reasons to abandon the people who need it most, like the Muslims of Bosnia, Rwanda's Tutsis and the Darfurians.

LeBor, who covered Bosnia's war for the London Times, uses UN documents and interviews with key officials to reveal how the organisation made, relayed and implemented decisions in Bosnia and Rwanda - and it makes bleak reading.

In both countries, he argues, UN officials at every level shied away from making bold decisions that could jeopardise their lucrative careers, and preferred to safeguard the UN's neutrality rather than acting robustly to stop an obvious aggressor - the Bosnian Serbs and Hutu militia - from slaughtering civilians.

UN member-states, meanwhile, protected their political and financial interests and refused to make a major military commitment to a collective cause: from top to bottom, the UN's impartiality was used as a fig leaf for inaction.

In Bosnia, so feeble was the mandate of UN peacekeepers that a single Bosnian Serb soldier blocking the road could stop an aid convoy from reaching towns and villages where thousands of Muslims were in desperate need of help. Peacekeepers were allowed to use their weapons only when directly fired upon, creating absurd and horrific situations - in one incident, French soldiers allowed Bosnian Serbs to open one of their armoured cars and shoot dead the Muslim deputy prime minister inside. Then they prevented British troops from intervening in the grim debacle.

In Rwanda, fearful western governments recalled their soldiers just before Hutus started slaughtering about one million Tutsis, so that when the killing began, there were only 270 UN peacekeepers left in the whole country.

Now, in Sudan, Janjaweed militiamen backed by the government have killed some 400,000 people in Darfur and forced about two million more to flee their homes.

In 2004, the then US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, declared that genocide was taking place in Darfur, but that Washington need not take extraordinary steps to stop it. More than two years on, the torture and killing continue, while China protects its huge oil interests in Sudan, and the US ponders its value in the so-called war on terror.

Even when the Security Council agrees on a resolution, it is often phrased so

vaguely that every country can interpret it as it wishes: when the UN finally used significant force in Bosnia and Rwanda, prompted by public outrage at the mass slaughter of civilians, it did so under reinterpretations of longstanding resolutions.

Amid the cynical realpolitik laid bare by LeBor's book, a few heroes emerge - people such as Diego Arria, Venezuela's diplomat-defender of Bosnia's Muslims, and Roméo Dallaire, the Canadian general who led UN peacekeepers in Rwanda.

But more often than not LeBor shows how and why the UN has repeatedly failed to fulfil its pledge to defend universal human rights, and challenges Kofi Annan's replacement as secretary general to use his powers more wisely and vigorously than the Ghanaian.

For the new man in the UN's top chair, Ban Ki-moon, this book is essential reading. For the rest of us, it is a clear-sighted look at how one of our greatest collective endeavours is riddled with our most basic human flaws.

Daniel McLaughlin covers central Europe and the Balkans for *The Irish Times*.

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