

THE QUIET DIPLOMAT

Ban Ki-moon reflects on his decade as UN secretary-general promoting human rights, climate policy, and polio eradication



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One of United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's earliest memories is of fleeing with his family into the mountains during the Korean War, his village burning behind him. His father and grandfather had to forage for food in the woods; his mother gave birth to his siblings away from anything remotely resembling a health facility. "I have known hunger," he says. "I have known war, and I have known what it means to be forced to flee conflict."

The soldiers who came to their rescue were flying the blue flag of the United Nations. The UN provided them with food and their schools with books. And the experience sowed in Ban a belief in the transformative power of global solidarity, a belief he has spent his career working to achieve.

A meeting with U.S. President John F. Kennedy at the White House after winning an essay-writing contest as a teenager inspired Ban to become a diplomat. He entered Korea's foreign service in 1970, serving roles including ambassador and minister of foreign affairs and trade before being elected UN secretary-general in 2006.

Ban made polio eradication a top priority of his second five-year term. In 2012, he chaired a polio summit on the sidelines of the annual General Assembly, securing strong commitment to eradication from all

the heads of state where polio is endemic as well as ministers from key donor governments, Rotary, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. He has included polio messages in his briefings, during visits to polio-priority countries, and in statements at multilateral events including the General Assembly, African Union, and Group of Eight summits, and has personally participated in polio vaccination campaigns.

In 2016, Ban addressed the Rotary International Convention in Seoul and donated his \$100,000 honorarium to Rotary's End Polio Now campaign. "The 'wind in our sails' is Rotary International," he now tells *The Rotarian*. "Thanks to its advocacy, we have been able to come within striking distance of a polio-free world. I will always be grateful to its leaders and its many volunteers on the front lines of this effort. They are truly noble humanitarians."

Ban is stepping down from his position at the United Nations after a decade that saw declines in poverty and achievements in public health. But it was also a rough period for the UN, with rising violent extremism and an unprecedented population of refugees. His successor, António Guterres, former prime minister of Portugal, begins 1 January. *The Rotarian's* Diana Schoberg interviewed Ban about polio, his legacy, and how Rotary and the UN can work together. "I believe the world is moving in the right direction," he says. "I am generally hopeful."

THE ROTARIAN: A cornerstone of your legacy will be the Paris Agreement on climate change. How were you able to rally people together about this issue?

BAN: It has been a long, hard road, but it has paid off. I went against all of my advisers by raising climate change with then-U.S. President George W. Bush in my first visit to the White House during my third week in office in 2007. He was a bit surprised – but he came on board. At the meeting in Bali where we adopted the first road map leading to the Paris agreement, the United States gave its last-minute support. President Bush confided to me at a private farewell lunch in 2009 that the U.S. delegation leader had phoned him from Bali for advice and he told her to do what I wanted.

While the outcome of the Copenhagen climate change conference in 2009 was not what we had expected, it was the start of a long road that led to the Paris Agreement. My vision to get to an agreement was based on one word: inclusion. The issue of climate is too important and too big for only governments to take on. We opened the doors of the United Nations to civil society and to the business sector. They, too, needed a seat at the table. Civil society has kept pressure on governments to act. Whether it's the energy sector, the insurance industry, or transportation companies, they all have a role to play.

TR: What is your most unsung achievement at the UN?

BAN: I have made human rights a top priority, which is reflected across all areas of the United Nations. Human rights are integral to the Sustainable Development Goals [a set of 17 goals adopted in 2015 to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all within 15 years]. And after hearing “never again” over and over again in response to atrocity crimes, I created the Human Rights up Front initiative to prevent and respond to warning signs of looming atrocities.

I have also been proud to be the first secretary-general to speak out against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. And because I believe in leading by example, I backed up my words with full equality in terms of benefits.

Sometimes in the world of diplomacy, “unsung” successes are destined to remain so. I have often employed quiet diplomacy, whether to ensure the release of an imprisoned journalist or convincing a leader to truly listen to the aspirations of his people. Quiet diplomacy is about letting the other party get the credit for doing the right thing. It's not about me getting accolades.

TR: With the recent setback in polio eradication in Nigeria in mind, what is the key to ending polio?

BAN: Trust is essential. To earn and maintain trust, it is absolutely imperative that there be no politicization of polio eradication activities. Community and religious leaders are our best advocates in this effort.

The detection of wild poliovirus in Nigeria is a serious setback, but it is only a setback. The world has never been closer to eradicating polio, we have the tools and strategies that we know are effective in stopping the disease, and together we have reduced polio transmission to the lowest levels in history in just three countries worldwide. If we continue, with courage and determination, on our current trajectory, we will stop polio once and for all. Failure is not an option, and in the very near future, I believe we will deliver on Rotary's promise of a polio-free world for all generations to come.

TR: What decision or course of action from your time as secretary-general would you change if you could?

BAN: I have made clear to the member states, and particularly to the members of the Security Council, that they work best when they are united. That is why I have felt so frustrated about the disunity in the Security Council when it comes to Syria. As I have argued, it shames us all that we as an international community have not been able to come together and halt this brutal war. While that disunity has persisted, more than 300,000 people have died. I will keep working until my last day in office to resolve this horrific crisis, but I need the support of the member states – all of them.

TR: UN peacekeepers played a role in introducing cholera to Haiti after the devastating earthquake in that country in 2010. The epidemic has since killed 10,000 people and sickened 800,000. What can the UN do to restore trust?

BAN: It is clear that the United Nations has a moral responsibility to the victims of the cholera epidemic and for supporting Haiti in overcoming the epidemic and building sound water, sanitation, and health systems. During my own visit to the country, I made it clear that I deeply regret the terrible suffering the people of Haiti have endured as a result of the cholera epidemic.

I am working to develop a package that would provide material assistance and support to those Haitians most directly affected by cholera. These efforts must include, as a central focus, the victims of the disease and their families. The United Nations also intends to intensify its support to reduce, and ulti-

mately end, the transmission of cholera, improve access to care and treatment, and address the longer-term issues of water, sanitation, and health systems in Haiti.

TR: The UN's recent Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 are more numerous and seem more detailed than the Millennium Development Goals – 17 goals with multiple subpoints for each. What was the thinking behind that, and how can the UN and partners keep so many goals in focus?

BAN: I have heard the criticism that we have too many goals and they may be unwieldy.

These new goals matter because they will be the yardstick that everything between now and 2030 is judged against. These goals are far more than aspirations. They provide a guide for action in the key areas where countries will have to invest in order to move forward.

Moreover, the goals, including their subpoints, were not imposed by the United Nations bureaucrats like some forced agenda. The 17 SDGs are the product of long and detailed consultations by member states as well as the broader civil society through online portals and local meetings. We may have a big number, but the goals are a true reflection of what the world has been asking for.

TR: We are seeing globalism being rejected in many pockets. Nations are becoming less stable, and tribalism or religious sectarianism is gaining some appeal. What can the UN offer to counter these trends?

BAN: This has been a period of multiple challenges – from the financial crisis to the uprisings in the Middle East, from the rise of violent extremism to renewed geopolitical competition in Europe and Asia.

In times of uncertainty, we do see a rise of politicians who prey on people's fear, especially when it comes to the rising number of refugees and migrants. We must reject the dangerous political math that says you add votes by dividing people, and we need to stand against bigotry and xenophobia in all its forms. The United Nations has just launched a campaign against this poison. It is designed to foster communities of inclusion and mutual respect – and we call it, simply, “Together.”

This time of uncertainty has also witnessed a rise in violent extremism. While it's of course critical to counter this extremism, we must also work hard to prevent it. I recently put together the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, which places heavy emphasis on human rights. Experience with counterterrorism measures has underscored the need to avoid stoking the

fires we are trying to extinguish. To this end, civil society organizations, like Rotary, have an important part to play by promoting inclusion and dialogue between communities.

TR: What advice can you offer Rotary leaders on working with people in a diverse, multicultural, global organization?

BAN: I'm not sure that I can offer any advice to Rotary leaders. Your organization is older than the United Nations and, arguably, you have a broader representation than we do. When I had the privilege to address your members recently in Korea, I think I counted more flags in the hall than we have at the United Nations!

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Since you are asking, I will share some thoughts. Every day that I have worked at the United Nations, I have combined my efforts with people from every part of the world, and that has shown me the value of having as broad a range of viewpoints as possible when dealing with the world's problems. I found that I gain much from listening to people from cultures other than mine who approach problems and solutions differently. That intellectual diversity, whether in the UN or any other organization, is to be cherished and nourished. We all have much to gain from listening to others. No one culture holds the keys to all the solutions.

TR: How can Rotary and the UN make the most of our partnership?

BAN: Rotary and other similarly engaged civil society organizations represent the best that the world has to offer. You understand the need to get involved and participate positively in the lives of your communities and the world around us.

We now have a global agenda to build a better, more equitable, more sustainable world. I would encourage Rotary International to embrace the Sustainable Development Goals and find within them areas where we could, as partners, replicate the success of the polio eradication campaign. ■