Some days are simply unforgettable. Thursday, 31st March, 2005, was one of them. I was a United Nations press officer back then, and terribly proud of being paid to help make the world a better place. Working at the UN headquarters in New York felt like entering Plato’s Ideal City, where realpolitik mixes with utopia. Despite its failures, I still had faith in the organisation's willingness to make a difference in people’s lives. I used to think the UN’s imperfections were humane, and “out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made”, as Immanuel Kant put it.

On that Thursday, a colleague and I at the French desk of the Press Release Section were asked to cover a “historic” meeting. The UN Security Council was considering the referral of the horrific crimes committed by the regime of President Omar al-Bashir in Darfur to the International Criminal Court (ICC). The meeting kept being delayed all day long. We were told that behind the closed-door, tense deliberations were raging. In Darfur, the victims, yearning for justice, were holding their breath, as many feared China would block the resolution to protect its client-regime of Bashir.

Late that night, at around 22:30 hours, we had to rush off to the meeting. Finally, the vote was going to take place. As I was making my way to the Security Council room, I was rather surprised by the smell of alcohol and the overwhelming joy and delight manifested by a loud diplomatic crowd. I was shocked to learn that the much-awaited vote was delayed, not due to some “tense deliberations”, but because diplomats were indulging themselves at a dinner party with plenty of booze. The Brazilian mission had organised a party to celebrate its presidency of the Council on the last day of the month,
as the UN tradition goes.

The diplomats took their seats around the horseshoe-shaped table and tried hard to wear a serious face on top of their alcohol-induced red one. One representative after the other took the floor, delivering speeches they sometimes struggled to read. But since the fun was still in the air, the permanent representative to the UN of the Philippines, Mr. Lauro Baja, cracked this joke about the third resolution on Sudan on that month, which he compared to the third child of the Security Council:

“There was a middle-aged couple who had two stunningly beautiful teenage daughters, but who decided to try one last time for the son they had always wanted. After months of trying, the wife became pregnant, and, sure enough, delivered a healthy baby boy nine months later. The happy father rushed to the nursery to see his new son. He took one look at him, but was horrified to find that he was the ugliest child he had ever seen. He went to his wife and said that there was no way that he could have fathered the child. ‘Look at the two beautiful daughters I fathered,’ he cried. Then he gave her a stern look, and asked, ‘Have you been fooling around?’ The wife smiled sweetly and said, ‘Not this time.’”

Before Mr. Baja wrapped up his joke, a ripple of laughter erupted in the room. Even the usually stern Kofi Annan flashed a smile. Regardless of the point Baja was trying to make about the legitimacy of the resolution, I felt that such humour was inappropriate. Unsurprisingly, the video of that session was never posted on the UN website. Some editors must have felt it lacked the minimum of decency to be shared with the public.

This incident made me question the seriousness of the Council. It also convinced me to leave the protocol-ridden and speech-oriented UN headquarters for the field. The following month, I embarked on an eight-year long journey in the field, across Iraq, Jordan, Sudan and Egypt. At the headquarters in New York, most of my work was limited to summing up delegates’ speeches. But, in the field, I had to generate stories and pitch them, speak to the media, organise media events and run public information teams. Whether serving at the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), the UN-African Union peacekeeping mission in Darfur (UNAMID) or the UN Development Programme in Sudan (UNDP-Sudan), my work consisted of promoting what the UN does, and how and why it does it.

I enjoyed working with people from around the world, from Fiji to Chile. Bringing people from different places to work together is the best thing the UN does. Perhaps each staff had her or his own reason for joining the organisation. Some enrolled for the generous paycheck, others for the organisation’s ideals, and still others, including myself, wanted it all: the paycheck and the good conscience. But my experience in Iraq and Sudan taught me I couldn’t have it both ways. It also taught me a great deal about the double face of the organisation, the bright and the ugly one.

In Iraq, UNAMI staff worked hard with the Iraqi civil society to track and expose human rights violations, promote the freedom of the press, champion women’s, children’s and minorities’ rights and promote good governance, but their work kept being blocked by UNAMI itself. While working to expand people’s rights and freedoms in Iraq, UNAMI was also empowering the US-installed Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, the main perpetrator of human rights violations in the country and the prime obstacle to good governance. UNAMI, under the leadership of the German diplomat,
Martin Kobler, helped the US and Iran’s man in Baghdad take the country from chaos to tyranny and terrorism.

Soon after he took office on October 2011, Kobler told a meeting I attended: “Al-Maliki said that the only thing he wanted UNAMI to do in Iraq is to help shut down Camp Ashraf. And this is what we are going to do.” Maliki’s plan was to force some 3,400 unarmed Iranian dissidents out of the camp, where Saddam Hussein (whose death warrant was signed by Al-Maliki in December 2006) had hosted them since 1986. He wanted them transferred to a location near Baghdad’s International Airport, and then out of the country. This was none of UNAMI’s official business, but it would soon become one.

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Kobler was acting under the instructions of Lynn Pasco, the American chief of the UN Political Department in New York. Pasco was implementing American foreign policy, using UNAMI and other political missions. Since Exon Mobile was thriving in Iraq, al-Maliki had to be pleased and appeased. This meant that the transfer of the Iranian dissidents had to take priority over the inclusiveness of the Iraqi political process and other urgent matters, the raison d’être of UNAMI’s presence in Iraq.

The only opposition Kobler faced was from us, the mission staff. Throughout my UN career, I had never seen so many colleagues intensely opposing their chief as in Iraq. “I am a lawyer and I am telling you: don’t sign the damn thing [memorandum of understanding],” a senior colleague shouted at Kobler’s face in a desperate effort to stop him from making us do al-Maliki’s dirty work. We wanted him to focus on helping Iraq, but our call fell on deaf ears. The fate of Iraqis was sealed in New York.

While UNAMI and the UN’s refugee agency, UNHCR, were busy transferring the Iranian mujahideen from Camp Ashraf to Camp Liberty, al-Maliki was firming his grip on the power he had grabbed, thanks to Iran’s maneuvering and the consent of the administration of President Barack Obama. Nothing could’ve been worse for the Iraqi people than the UN looking the other way when the US was offering al-Maliki a carte blanche to violate the Iraqi Constitution, wreak havoc on the newly formed institutions, and cleanse or disenfranchise Sunnis from Iraqi politics (which ultimately drove the most disenfranchised ones into the arms of Al Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State).

All along, Kobler was acting as one al-Maliki’s top aides. As the deputy chief of the Public Information Office, I found myself disagreeing with him, but often failing to stop his propaganda. My frustration had reached unbearable levels when I was head-haunted for the post of the spokesperson for UNAMID in Darfur in western Sudan. I didn’t hesitate to accept the offer, as I couldn’t imagine the UN appeasement of criminal regimes could get worse.

Soon after I arrived in Darfur in August 2012, I finally got the Philippines representative’s joke. The Security Council was a laughing matter. The many resolutions on Darfur signed off by Russia, China, France, Britain and the United States – the five permanent veto-holding members of the UN Security Council, also known as the P-5 – had degenerated into a farce. For each of these big powers, President Omar al-Bashir was a good client-regime that had to stay. But faced with mounting international outrage, the P5 had to be seen taking many steps against Khartoum. In reality, each step was purposely flawed, allowing al-Bashir to remain in power and get away with mass murder.

The farce started in 2004, when the Council “demanded” that the Sudanese government disarm the
Janjaweed militias who were raping and killing civilians in Darfur and bring their leaders to justice or face “further actions”. One year later, al-Bashir began integrating most of his Janjaweed death squads into the armed forces, handing them heavier weapons and a license to kill civilians. In reaction, the Council’s threat of “further actions” turned out to be a partial and flawed arms embargo that allowed Khartoum to buy weapons, and use them in the entire country, except the western region. Obviously, without any mechanism to enforce this ridiculous arms embargo, Chinese and Russian weapons continued to flow into Darfur, in violation of these two countries’ own resolution!

Continuing this charade, the Council referred the situation in Darfur to the ICC in 2005. Al-Bashir and other suspects were later indicted for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. However, in the absence of a mechanism to secure their arrest, al-Bashir (who was toppled in April last year) and his aides are yet to face justice at the Hague, even though al-Bashir has been charged and sentenced for corruption in a Sudanese court.

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The last step of this farce was the 2007 Council decision to send UNAMID, the largest-ever toothless peacekeeping force, to Darfur. Al-Bashir only accepted this decision after the P5 caved in to his main condition: that UNAMID had to be drawn principally from African nations. This meant that Khartoum could kill, injure and humiliate African peacekeepers with absolute impunity. The Council also accepted a shameful Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) agreement that put the genocidal Sudanese government in charge of the protection of UNAMID personnel. This is how immoral and farcical the P5 could get.

The eight months I spent in Darfur were long enough to convince me to resign and expose the UN’s systematic cover-up of the deadly bombing, mass assault on civilians, rape and forced displacement (mainly committed by Sudanese government forces), along with the daily harassment, humiliation and deadly assault on UNAMID peacekeepers. By April 2013, I had had enough of the UN’s hypocrisy. On the one hand, it claims to protect the people, help democratise societies, ensure respect of human rights and many other noble causes I still believe in. But, on the other hand, the essence of the UN’s work is to serve the P5 and their allies in their respective “spheres of interest” – a new euphemism for the former colonial concept of “spheres of influence”. This often entails shielding criminal and corrupt Third World governments. With one face, the UN caters to the people of the world, and with the other it serves first and foremost the P-5 governments. It’s “We the peoples” utopia versus “We the governments” reality.

The conclusion I reached is that what I witnessed in Iraq and in Sudan cannot be blamed on a few bad apples, or the poor performance of UNAMI and UNAMID. The problem was much bigger and ran much deeper in the system. It was a policy issue that starts in New York, at the UN Security Council. The colluding P5 have been using the UN to salvage their client-regimes facing threats from internal democratic forces and/or armed rebellion. They are also using it to throw the regimes that don’t know how to accommodate them, as happened in Côte d’Ivoire. France had had enough of Laurent Gbagbo’s rebellion and planned to install its new protégé, Hassan Ouattara, through the 2011 election. When Gbagbo lost the election but refused to quit, France dragged UN forces and weaponry into a joint bombing of his palace. It blatantly used and abused the UN for a “humanitarian” regime change to save the interests of its multinational corporations in its former
colony.

But the Big Five could not have done it without a network of diplomats, including Western "democrats" like Kobler, who cherish democracy and peace in their own countries, but sustain dictatorship regimes across the world. Kobler is an excellent example of the UN’s revolving door politics. Once he accomplished his American-Iranian mission in Iraq, he was rushed to DR Congo in 2013 to head a 26,000-strong force and wage a UN war against armed militias on behalf of the government of Joseph Kabila. Under the Kabila family, the P5 countries had full access to the country’s precious reserves of diamonds, gold, cobalt, uranium and, of course, oil and related business. They had to protect the regime that accommodated their economic interests in return.

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Having defeated some rebel groups for Kabila, Kobler headed to Libya, another oil-rich country the P5, under NATO, had bombed, in another “humanitarian” regime change. Kobler’s new mission consisted of installing in the capital Tripoli an Islamist government made up of militia leaders that would capture state funds and institutions. By imposing this UN-supported rebel faction against the resistance of others, the UN became a party in the Libyan conflict.

It’s precisely in Libya where one could see how the P5 are nothing but the world’s most dangerous gang and top arms’ producers and traders. Following his resignation, the UN envoy in Libya, Ghassan Salame, revealed that most of the Security Council members gave the retired Lieutenant Haftar the green light to militarily attack the very Tripoli-based government they had installed and claimed to support. When an intergovernmental organisation reaches such levels of hypocrisy and immorality, it simply needs to be resisted, scrapped and dismantled, instead of being reformed. Since the Security Council cannot be reformed – unless one thinks it’s possible to convert Dracula or Jack the Ripper into a saint – it has to go. And We the People can build another one, a better one.

My UN journey undoubtedly broke the blind trust I used to have in others. I learned to be more sceptical, without being cynical. This journey showed me my own limitations, flaws and mistakes too. I realised how big the gap is between who I am and the person I truly want to be.

I also learned to compromise on many things except two: Goodness and Truth. Truth “has been, is, and will be beautiful”, Tolstoy said.

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