



Book Review

Kofi Annan: A Man of Peace in a World of War

Meisler, Stanley 2007

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Reviewed by Theo Neethling

Department of Political Science, Faculty of Military Science (Military Academy), Stellenbosch University

In *Kofi Annan, A Man of Peace in a World of War*, Stanley Meisler presents a biography of Kofi Annan as a man who rose from schoolboy in Ghana to world statesman and Nobel prize winner, and of the joys and despair that marked his decade as leader of the United Nations (UN). The book is not an authorised biography and Annan did not read the manuscript before publication, but he was aware of the biographer's intentions and co-operated with the project. He also encouraged his staff and friends to meet with Meisler.

Meisler, also the author of *United Nations: The First Fifty Years*, has known Annan for many years as a journalist (of the *Los Angeles Times*) and portrays the former Secretary-General as someone who is not an ideologue or academic theorist. Annan is described as a pragmatic leader who adhered to some core values and unconditionally – almost religiously – promoted the letter and spirit of the charter of the UN during his terms as chief functionary of the world organisation.

A number of interesting facts and issues about Annan are presented and highlighted. For instance, Annan, who joined the UN as an employee at a fairly young age, had his first substantive diplomatic assignment in 1991 at the age of fifty-two when he was asked to persuade Iraq to let go nine hundred UN workers and dependents that were taken hostage. Before that he spent much of his time pushing folders around a desk or poring over budget figures as a personnel and budget specialist in the UN bureaucracy. In 1993 he took over as UN head of peacekeeping under Boutros Boutros-Ghali in order to strengthen Africa's presence in the higher echelons of the UN. It had taken him more than thirty years to climb from the lowest rank in the UN to the rank of Undersecretary-General.

As Undersecretary-General in charge of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, Kofi Annan presided over the most spectacular rise in peacekeeping in UN history. By 1994, the second year of Annan's tenure as peacekeeping chief, the UN deployed more than 75 000 peacekeepers throughout the world. However, although he was quoted in the news from time to time, Meisler points out that Annan did not have a high public and media profile in those days. He describes how Boutros-Ghali ran a centralised UN, leaving little room for his top lieutenants to shine. He did not even allow an Undersecretary-General like Annan to brief the Security Council on its own. In fact, Meisler contends that Boutros-Ghali did not want Annan to have a high media profile.

The book furthermore deals with Annan's stint as UN peacekeeping chief when the slaughter of approximately 800 000 Tutsis and moderate

Hutus occurred in Rwanda. It is said that Annan still lives with guilt over this humanitarian catastrophe and therefore later apologised for the failure of the UN system to prevent and stop the genocide in Rwanda. For him the Rwandan crisis also drove home the institutional weakness of the UN. As peacekeeping chief, Annan was also heavily involved in the Bosnian crisis – another crisis that made the UN look ridiculous and effete, arousing worldwide revulsion at its failure.

The part on Annan's election as Secretary-General of the UN in 1996 reveals some fascinating behind-the-scenes-politics. There were significant differences between the Secretary-General and the United States (US) towards the end of Boutros-Ghali's first term. Moreover, conflict between Boutros-Ghali and Madeleine Albright, former US Ambassador to the UN, was taken to personal levels. The US therefore decided to block a second term for Boutros-Ghali. Apparently, many Africans felt cheated when the first African Secretary-General turned out to be an Egyptian from North Africa and decided that if they were going to get another chance at the job, they would prefer a black African from south of the Sahara. The US campaign favoured Annan and after several ballots in the Security Council which brought Annan to the fore as the primary and later sole candidate, the French Ambassador (and his right to veto) stood between Annan and the top UN position. However, after some further diplomatic footwork, Annan was elected by the Security Council as the seventh Secretary-General of the UN. In this regard, Meisler presents some insightful information on the international political bickering that led to Annan supplanting Boutros-Ghali. The enormous political influence of the US as the world's only superpower is also evident from this part of the book.

As top UN official, Annan understood the limitations of a job that provided the aura of a world statesman but no political or military power of his own. Annan also knew that he reigned over a battered and weakened UN as the three crises of Somalia, Rwanda and Bosnia had taken a bitter toll. The weakness of the UN was most glaring in African peacekeeping challenges and the author of the book deals with these

issues in a most interesting and gripping manner. It also deals with Annan's negotiations with the former Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, over suspected programmes for weapons of mass destruction and his (unsuccessful) talks about an agreement that would prevent military action against Iraq.

Meisler further turns our attention to the crises of 1999 in Kosovo and East Timor, which tried the Secretary-General even further as a man who is at the pinnacle of world diplomacy, but who has only moral force and no real political power. The US specifically, did not mind Annan handling the East Timor crisis, but refused to allow him to take charge of Kosovo and especially to negotiate on behalf of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In the end, NATO – and not the UN – intervened and patrolled Kosovo with peacekeeping troops. Spurred by reports and controversies over UN peacekeeping, the Secretary-General asked Lakhdar Brahimi, a former Algerian foreign minister, to head a panel that would study the future of UN peacekeeping and this resulted in a landmark document, popularly known as the Brahimi report.

On a different level the book also deals with Annan's efforts to change the image of the UN in another, more personal way. He allowed himself to become a celebrity in New York, accepting invitations to dinners, parties and other occasions regularly. He also dealt with the plight of Africa in a very personal way and put considerable energy into issues concerning the development of the African continent. But the landmark events on the morning of 11 September 2001 in New York when two planes crashed into the World Trade Centre demanded his attention especially. In the end, Annan's energy was consumed by the invasion in Iraq. His personality and position as UN chief functionary often put him at odds with the Bush Administration throughout the Iraq crisis and war. In the most significant act of his tenure, he opposed the American-led and American-inspired invasion of Iraq in 2003. In this regard, Meisler describes how the Bush Administration displayed a disdain for Kofi Annan and the UN. He describes how relations worsened and how the White House began to look on the Secretary-General as far more

than an annoyance. In fact, the ten years of Annan's administration were overwhelmed by the crisis in Iraq. In the meantime, the troubled Secretary-General also had to deal with many more issues than Iraq: Israel, Darfur, southern Sudan, Cyprus, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, HIV/Aids, and several others. However, his decisions on Iraq mattered more than anything else.

In addition, another more personal crisis crippled Kofi Annan in his stride: the so-called oil for food scandal. In 2004 his son, Kojo, was mired in the scandal and all of these pressures left him tired, depressed and absent. According to Meisler, he was fatigued, had lost his appetite and did not feel like seeing anyone. This took quite a toll from his person, but Annan managed to regain his thoughtfulness, his alert mind, his grasp of a myriad of issues, his careful and articulate speech, his engaging sense of humour, and his uncanny ability to listen carefully to others. Unfortunately, his troubles did not end. His reform proposals for a radical overhaul of the UN Secretariat pushed Annan into a confrontation with the UN staff union.

In the end, Meisler argues that despite the many challenges and crises that Annan had to face, his administration should actually be credited with an impressive handful of major achievements. He established the principle of the right of the international community to intervene politically and militarily when a government abuses its own people. Annan also revived a weakened peacekeeping department and increased the deployment of troops to near-record levels. He injected openness and transparency into the UN system. The UN's role as the main co-ordinator of international relief was further solidified under Annan. In the final instance, he presided over an organisation that could not be described as irrelevant. The point is also made that the UN works best when the US and the Secretary-General are in harmony – a wedding of American power and political influence with a moral force reflecting the needs and desires of the rest of the world.

Kofi Annan, A Man of Peace in a World of War is not an academic work per se and does not intend to be, but is most certainly of academic interest and value. The book complements other insightful works, such as William Shawcross' book on UN peacekeeping, *Deliver Us from Evil*. It is good reading material for scholars, students and all those interested in diplomacy, international affairs, international organisations, war and peace, or anyone interested in the affairs and functioning of the UN as the pre-eminent organisation responsible for international peace and security. Personally, I find this book and biography on Kofi Annan most stimulating, lucid and insightful.