



UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura

US Back to UNESCO Amidst Big Changes

by Mehri Madarshahi

When the United States rejoins UNESCO on 1 October, it will find an organization very substantially different from the one it left in 1984. UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura, meeting with journalists in his modest 8th floor office at the Agency's Paris headquarters, recounts the sweeping reforms he has instituted since assuming office in 1999, cutting and reallocating staff, as he pruned and refocused the Agency's major programs in education, culture, the sciences and communication.

While sticking to a zero growth budget of some \$544 million, he has directed more resources to UNESCO's basic mandates. A new personnel policy has been put in place, with arrangements that ensure the recruitment of the best available staff and more resources for staff training ("about \$3 million — I would like to increase that"), and a decentralized and stronger administrative structure. The ratio of professional staff to General Service is "by far the best in the UN System."

Getting the United States back into UNESCO has been an important objective ever since he took over, Mr. Matsuura says, and Washington has been invited to attend UNESCO meetings as an observer. "Sometimes they came, sometimes no." Then last year, speaking to the General Assembly, United States President George Bush announced unexpectedly the decision to rejoin the Agency. The decision, coming from an administration accused by critics of being against multilateralism, surprised many in the hall.



Brian Aggeler, United States Permanent Observer at UNESCO lauds reforms

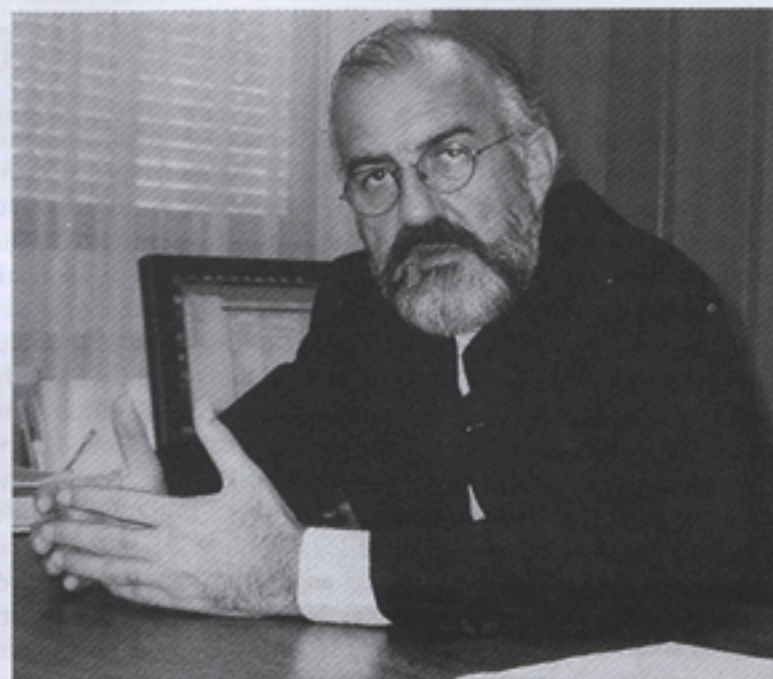
Mr. Brian Aggeler, the Permanent Observer of the US to UNESCO, says the decision reflects Washington's continued commitment to multilateral diplomacy but also the fact that "UNESCO is a changed organization." The 1984 decision to leave UNESCO "was taken based on the rampant poor management and the fact that this Organization was engaged in the promotion of ideals that were not shared by the US, including freedom of the press" he says. "Today, it has reformed itself and believes in freedom of information and is engaged in important issues such as universal education, culture, world heritage, water and promotion of dialogue among civilizations which are of great importance to the United States". Mr. Aggeler points out that even during its 18-year absence the United States continued to be one of the top ten contributors of extra-budgetary funds to UNESCO. After its return, he says, "the US initially will be in a listening mode, but as a major contributor one should expect an American perspective to emerge soon after".

With the United States, UNESCO membership will go up to 190 and the biennial budget will go up by \$66 million. (Of the two other countries that quit UNESCO at the same time as the United States, one — Britain — has returned; Singapore has yet to do so.) In addition to the regular budget, UNESCO also has extra-budgetary resources of over \$273 million.

Program Priorities

In presenting his 2004-2005 budget to member States, Mr. Matsuura laid out three scenarios, based on three different budget levels: one with zero nominal growth, the second with "reduced zero real growth" (\$576 million) and the third, with the addition of the US share (totalling \$610 million). The Executive Board supported the \$610 million budget. The "impending return of the US offers a rare historic opportunity to both parties" Mr. Matsuura says. "The US could consolidate its role and make a solid impact on the international agenda and UNESCO will be enabled to implement its program of activity including its top priorities such as education for all in Sub Saharan Africa and South Asia, provision of fresh water and eco system, the ethics of science and technology. These are important priorities which are underfunded and it is expected that the major part of the US contributions will be used for advancement of the five priority areas identified by the reform process."

Within its five major program elements, principal priorities of UNESCO are: Education for all (77.9% of the Education Sector's total resources), water and associated ecosys-



Ahmad Jalali of Iran, President of UNESCO General Conference,

UNESCO a Shrinking Whale?

Ahmad Jalali, President of the General Conference of UNESCO, got his first degree in Mechanical Engineering, his second in philosophy, and his third in Political Philosophy. The first two were from Iran, the third from Oxford, where he now teaches when not steering delegations through the proceedings of the UN Specialized Agency that deals with all the most interesting subjects on the international agenda: education, science and culture, with communications a key element of all three. He greets visiting journalists in a cool meeting room behind one of UNESCO's large meeting rooms, a veritable oasis in a Paris broiling in the hottest summer on record.

We have asked to speak with him about UNESCO reform, a matter close to his heart, it turns out. He launches into a fluent exposition. There are three aspects of reform. Conceptual, administrative and structural. The administrative and structural aspects are in hand; "we need to revitalize the spirit now" and maintain the moral and intellectual solidarity that underlies the organization. It has been weakened over the years. A 1991 Japanese resolution that did away with the component of the Executive Board that consisted of individuals of personal qualification, is something of a marker in that regard.

He recounts with some glee how he opened the last session of the General Conference with a Flash presentation. It showed a (cartoon) whale in the ocean. Then the whale is shifted to a sea, then a lake, then a pond, then a glass. "I told them, UNESCO is like that whale. When we started, we had the whole ocean of ideas to swim in. Now we have a glass." The focus on the narrowest of mandates, he says, can lead to a constriction of the very broad mandate UNESCO was given at its founding. To get back to that, he proposed to the Executive Board that they engage in brainstorming sessions on ideas and concepts. "No records, no outcome." That way, the ideas could filter back to governments and to civil society." Responses from the permanent delegations at UNESCO have been enthusiastic.

The matter has gained a new salience because UNESCO is the lead agency in the Dialogue of Civilizations. Governments can't represent cultures and civilizations. Nor can organized religions. Dogmas and ideologies can't have a dialogue; they can merely exchange views. A dialogue presupposes an openness, a willingness to submit to the process, to allow the exchange to take its own course and go where it will. Governments are used to negotiations. That presupposes that you know where you want to go, that the end is in sight at the beginning. That is not the case with dialogue. The Executive Board, he says, is discussing traditions, ceremonies, beliefs, languages — culture — and trying to "codify something that cannot be codified" Can lawyers and power brokers codify culture?

The 2001 Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity emphasized the importance of differences among human societies. "It is similar to bio-diversity in nature." After 9/11, especially, that is urgent.

REFORMS

continued from page 4

tems (57.7% of the Natural Science sector's total resources), the ethics of science and technology (24.6% of the Social and Human Sciences Sector's program resources), cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue (57.4% of the Culture Sector's total resources), and equitable access to information and knowledge (67.2% of the total program resources of the Sector for Communication and Information).

Problem Areas

The major problem areas that UNESCO has to tackle relate to staff management. To some extent, the reforms themselves have created problems: the newly introduced recruitment procedures have proved to be lengthy and time consuming, and have created a bottleneck, for Mr. Matsuura insists on making the final decision personally in every case. While this drastically reduces the chances of nepotism, it has led to inefficiencies caused by the lack of qualified program staff. It is hoped that the introduction of an electronic system will reduce delays. This will be important in the next few years, for nearly 40 per cent of senior staff are set to retire.

Another major problem is lack of constructive negotiations with staff during a period when there have been major cuts and redeployments of personnel. Upon assuming office, Mr. Matsuura removed an entire layer of senior special advisers at the D-2 and Assistant-Director-General levels. Some 192 posts (including 77 at the General service level), were eliminated or downgraded.

In the absence of any comprehensive report on the overall picture facing staff, the Presidents of UNESCO's two staff unions were reluctant to offer any general critique, but though they are far apart on a number of issues, both see problems that need attention.

The representative of the *Syndicat du Personnel de UNESCO* (STU), referred to a general lack of transparency and accountability in present practices. Partly for that reason, STU has decided not to participate in discussions concerning reform of administration of justice. The president of the *International Staff Association of UNESCO* (ISAU) continues to be an elected representative to the advisory body on reform of appeal system in UNESCO. Both representatives complain that the staff were told of no criteria for meritorious performance or for promotions, and that although re-

ruitment was being opened to competition, the administration barely acknowledges applications from staff members. Another problem is that the processes of dealing with staff complaints are not transparent. ♦