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UN's Ban to Combat Criticism by U.S. House Republicans as Funds Questioned

By Bill Varner - Jan 21, 2011

[United Nations](#) Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he will try to blunt a threat by Republican leaders in the U.S. House of Representatives to withhold financial support for the world body by meeting with them to defend his record.

Republican Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of [Florida](#), new head of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, last July called the UN a “stew of corruption, mismanagement and negligence.”

Ros-Lehtinen is holding a hearing featuring UN critics on Jan. 25. She plans legislation to increase congressional scrutiny and to make the U.S. financial commitment voluntary, rather than an annual amount stipulated by a formula based on national economic output.

“I am sure I will be able to talk with Republicans in Congress and try to explain my priorities,” Ban said in an interview yesterday at Bloomberg’s headquarters in [New York](#). “I think their priorities and my priorities are the same. The only complaint they may have is the lack of much faster progress than they might have expected.”

Ban, 66, is seeking to make the case for his efforts to improve UN management and provide protection of civilians in conflict-ridden countries as he enters the final year of his five-year term in office. He declined to declare that he is seeking a second term.

UN Image

The former South Korean foreign minister said he is struggling to overcome what he called a “fixed, framed image” of the UN as ineffective and mismanaged over the course of its six decades of existence.

“I am also sometimes frustrated by a lack of progress, but if you look at my four years as secretary-general, we have made quite significant progress in terms of transparent work, accountability, more efficiency and mobility,” Ban said. “It was me who for the first time in UN history had all senior advisers disclose their financial assets.”

Ros-Lehtinen was elevated to chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee following the election of a Republican majority in the House last November. Ban has had good relations with President Barack Obama’s Democratic administration, which moved in June 2009 to erase all U.S. debts to the UN for the first time since 1999.

“I’ve met with Secretary Ban in the past and I look forward to meeting with him again to discuss what I believe is a critical need to bring sweeping reform to the UN,” Ros-Lehtinen said in an e-mailed statement yesterday. “Not nearly enough has been done to address the across-the-board lack of transparency, accountability, and resistance to reform that is seen throughout the sprawling UN apparatus.”

Ban said he has met Ros-Lehtinen many times, knows her “very well” and will travel to [Washington](#) soon to meet with congressional leaders of both parties.

Punishing the UN

Asked about the threat to withhold U.S. funding, Ban said that “rather than try to punish by cutting the budget, continuing with robust and proper financial support will be better for the long-term interests of the U.S.”

The U.S. last year contributed \$517 million to the UN’s operating budget of \$2.17 billion and \$2.68 billion of the \$9.67 billion peacekeeping budget, the most of any nation.

Republican control of the House will “create difficulty for the UN in a way that Ban has been spared,” Jeff Laurenti, a UN analyst at the New York-based [Century Foundation](#) research group, said in an interview.

Republican President [George W. Bush](#) “became a little more reliant on the UN as he was bogged down in [Iraq](#), Obama got the arrears paid off and Ban has had two years of a free ride,” Laurenti said. “Now there is the question of whether Ban is capable of defending the UN in the U.S. public debate when its enemies have power to wield against it.”

UN Reform Act

The first significant push for improvements in UN management came during the administration of President [Bill Clinton](#), who signed the Helms-Biden United Nations Reform Act of 1999. It tied U.S. payments to specified steps to improve management. Republican Representative Henry Hyde of [Illinois](#), a former Foreign Affairs chairman, tried unsuccessfully in 2006 to pass legislation tying payments to UN management changes.

U.S. debts, erased in 1999, began to build up again through late payments and underfunding during the [Bush administration](#).

“Ban is continuing modest incremental steps on transparency and accountability, but nothing substantial,” Mark Lagon, a former aide to Republican Senator Jesse Helms of [North Carolina](#) and now an adjunct senior fellow at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#) in Washington, said in an interview. “There is sincere concern on the part of Congress and the consistent position that voluntary funding works with agencies such as the World Food Program.”

UN Accomplishments

Ban and senior advisers who attended the interview cited such UN accomplishments as efforts to save lives in Myanmar following the 2008 cyclone there, success in Sudan in deploying a joint UN and African Union peacekeeping mission in the nation's Darfur region, and assisting with the recent peaceful referendum on Southern [Sudan](#)'s independence. Ban also noted work helping [Haiti](#) recover from natural disasters and Iraq from the civil war that followed the 2003 U.S. invasion.

“There should be some fair appreciation and understanding of what the UN is doing and has been doing,” Ban said. “The UN is an organization of 192 member states. The U.S. makes the largest financial contribution, but there are many other member states who have different views who have made the work of the UN sometimes very slow.”

[Human Rights Council](#)

Referring to Ros-Lehtinen's criticism of the UN's Geneva-based [Human Rights Council](#) for allowing the membership of [China](#), Cuba, [Saudi Arabia](#) and [Libya](#), all accused of human rights abuses, he said this was an issue of the governments that chose them rather than his responsibility.

“The [United States](#) has worked very constructively and productively with this secretary-general,” U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice said this week. “We have been grateful for his leadership on a number of important issues, and we continue to talk about the ways we can work together to strengthen this institution, to make it more efficient, more cost effective, and to improve its performance.”