



WikiLeaks reveals vast U.S. information-gathering operation at the U.N.

Colum Lynch ■ Sunday, November 28, 2010

The United States and other big powers have spied on the United Nations as long as it has existed. But WikiLeaks' disclosure Sunday of the first batch of a massive trove of internal U.S. diplomatic cables and directives gives a sense of how voracious America's appetite for information at the U.N. has grown.

A sweeping State Department directive -- the 2009 National HUMINT Collection Directive -- instructs U.S. diplomats to collect information on everything from U.N. Secretary-General **Ban Ki-moon's** views on the Middle East to the frequent-flyer account numbers of foreign delegates to the personal relationships between the U.N. representatives in Iran and North Korea and top officials in those governments. (HUMINT is shorthand for Human Intelligence Collection).

The directive, which was signed by Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton**, identifies five top near-term intelligence priorities: Sudan, the conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Somalia, Iran, and North Korea. But the State Department also expressed interest in a wide spread of other issues, from U.N. bureaucratic turf battles and revelations of U.N. corruption to possible financial links between U.N. staff, foreign governments, and terrorist organizations to voting practices of third-world countries in the U.N.'s myriad committees.

Most of the directive's information requests involve standard diplomatic reporting about foreign governments' positions. For instance, it places a high priority on obtaining information about the positions of the four other permanent members of the Security Council -- Britain, China, France, and Russia -- toward Iran, North Korea, and the Middle East. The directive urges American diplomats to discern the "views of members states on the next SYG [Secretary General] race, to include preferred candidates and candidates lacking U.N. member support." That phrase provided the first indication that the United States is at least considering the possibility that Ban may not be assured a second term when his first 5-year term expires at the end of 2011.

In most cases, the directive simply seeks to use American diplomats to gauge international attitudes towards a broad spectrum of U.S. and U.N. policies. For instance, how does the U.N. community view the role of the U.S. military in resolving conflicts in Africa? What are the prospects of China and Russia taking a tougher stance on human rights in Burma or Zimbabwe? How is international sentiment toward the International Criminal Court evolving?

But it also flags U.S. suspicions about the intentions of its foreign counterparts, citing concern that countries like China, France, and India may seek to "gain influence in Africa via U.N. peace operations." (China, for instance, now provides more U.N. peacekeepers than any other major power). It also voices concern about efforts by the European Union to secure additional voting rights in the U.N. and its various agencies, a move that could potentially dilute American influence.

Carne Ross, a former British diplomat, said that it's hardly news that countries spy on one another at the U.N. "More harmful is the reality that U.S. cables can be publicized in this devastating manner," he told *Turtle Bay*. "Diplomats may think twice before sharing confidences with U.S. diplomats -- at least until WikiLeaks is forgotten."

Perhaps the most surprising detail to emerge so far from the leaks is the extent to which U.S. diplomats in New York and abroad have been tasked with activities traditionally associated with intelligence gathering; i.e., collecting personal or financial information from their sources.

According to the directive, American diplomats are instructed to collect detailed biographical information, including business cards, cell-phone numbers, pagers, faxes, email listings, Internet or Intranet handles, credit-card and frequent flyer account numbers, and work schedules. It also calls on U.S. diplomats to collect "biographic and biometric information on ranking North Korean diplomats," as well as on diplomats from China, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, South Africa, Sudan, and Syria.

The new revelations were first divulged Sunday as part of a coordinated disclosure by WikiLeaks of nearly a quarter of a million sensitive U.S. diplomatic cables by several international news organizations, including the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Der Spiegel*, and *Le Monde*. WikiLeaks released a selection of the actual documents on its website Sunday afternoon EST.

The State Department cables are suspected of having been passed on to WikiLeaks by a 22-year-old intelligence analyst named **Bradley Manning**, according to the *Guardian*. Last spring, Manning was charged with leaking sensitive materials to WikiLeaks, including a video of an Apache helicopter killing two Reuters employees in 2007. He is facing court martial.

In a statement, State Department spokesman **P.J. Crowley** denied American diplomats had been instructed to conduct espionage: "Our diplomats are just that, diplomats. They represent our country around the world and engage openly and transparently with representatives of foreign governments and civil society. Through this process, they collect information that shapes our policies and actions. This is what diplomats, from our country and other countries, have done for hundreds of years."

A spokesman for the U.S. mission to the United Nations did not respond to a request for comment. **Farhan Haq**, a spokesman for the U.N. secretary-general, said the U.N. was "not in a position to comment on the authenticity of the document" but noted that the U.N. is "by its very nature a transparent organization that makes a great deal of information about its activities available to the public and member states." One U.N. official said that the organization had requested an explanation from the U.S. government on the allegations, but has not received an answer.

International treaties prohibit spying at the United Nations, but it is widely practiced by many states. A British intelligence analyst once revealed that U.S. and British spies listened in on the conversations of then Secretary-General **Kofi Annan** on the eve of U.S. led invasion of Iraq.

"The UN has previously asserted that bugging the secretary general is illegal," the *Guardian* reported, "citing the 1946 UN convention on privileges and immunities which states: 'The premises of the United Nations shall be inviolable. The property and assets of the United Nations, wherever located and by whomsoever held, shall be immune from search, requisition, confiscation, expropriation and any other form of interference, whether by executive, administrative, judicial or legislative action.'"

Other U.S. intelligence targets identified in the State Department directive:

*The U.S. solicits information on "plans and intentions" of U.N. Security Council members, especially the permanent members, in considering additional sanctions against North Korea. Also calls on U.S. diplomats to determine North Korea's position on "WMD-related issues" at the United Nations.

*The U.S. seeks information on Ban's "plans and intentions" regarding Iran, and wants to know whether the secretary-general or any member states intend to "pressure" the U.S. to take a particular course in the Middle East peace process.

*The U.S. solicits information on Iranian efforts to develop or promote spread of nuclear weapons and build diplomat support for its activities. Calls for monitoring Tehran's activities as the chair of the U.N. Development Program (UNDP), and its membership on the board of the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, an agency that has long touted Tehran's counternarcotics efforts. The U.S. is also seeking information on "development and democratization activities of the UNDP in Iran; details about the UNDP Resident Coordinator's relationship with Iranian officials."

*Foreign NGOs with influence on a range of issues, including human rights, globalization, justice and reproductive health. The U.S. directive voices concern at the capacity of some NGOs to "undermine U.S. policy initiatives" at the U.N. or to share "confidential" information with U.N. staff.

*The U.S. seeks information on any possible U.N. plans to expand, reinforce, or replace the U.N.-backed peacekeeping mission in Somalia.

*The U.S. directive also seeks the views of all key parties, including Hamas, in influencing the debate on the Middle East at the United Nations. For instance, it highlights the importance of deciphering the "views, plans and tactics of Hamas to gain support in the UNSC [U.N. Security Council] or UNGA [U.N. General Assembly] for its strategies and positions."

*The U.S. intelligence community is not only out for itself. The directive seeks information about possible threats against U.N. personnel and humanitarian aid workers in Iraq. It also seeks information on possible financial irregularities in a variety of U.N. agencies and international funds, including the World Health Organization and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria.

*Solicits information on the views of the Security Council and other U.N. members toward Cuban, Iranian, and Syrian bids for U.N. leadership position, presumably in an effort to block them from succeeding.