
The

Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization: Diplomacy's Cutting Edge

BY JEFF GREENWALD

MOMENTS BEFORE ARCHER Antonio Rebollo's flaming arrow sizzled across the night sky, King Juan Carlos of Spain appeared before the 65,000 athletes and spectators assembled in Barcelona's Estadio Olympic.

As head of state, it was Juan Carlos' duty to open the 25th Olympiad. When he did so, though, his announcement came not in Spanish, but in Catalan: the language of Catalunya, the fiercely autonomous nation-state of which Barcelona is the capital.

The king's address, made before some 3.5 billion viewers in 172 Olympic nations, was a gracious concession to Catalunan independence. It was also emblematic, in a much broader sense, of the direction the world is heading. Nations, peoples and indigenous populations from Alberta to Zanzibar are clamoring for recognition; how world leaders respond to their demands will determine the conflicts and alliances of the coming millennium.

The Catalans are fortunate. King Juan Carlos is openly respectful of their long history, and protective of their autonomy. The same cannot be said for the Basques, however, or the Croatians, or the Karen tribes along the Thai-Burmese borders. It cannot be said for the Mohawks or the Albanians, and certainly not for the Tibetans.

Such populations have long been in need of a powerful ally, willing to coach them in the ring of global realpolitik. Fortunately, such an animal now exists. It is the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), based in The Hague

and presided over by Michael van Walt, an international lawyer.

As a twelve-year-old living in Hong Kong, Michael van Walt devoured every book he could find describing the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet. Outraged, he wrote a letter to the Dalai Lama — the spiritual and political leader of the Tibetan people — and pledged to do something about it.

"I think children of that age are often very determined with what they want to do," says van Walt, a wiry, restless man with angular features and a hybrid European accent. "They're very serious about issues that intrigue them. And I was."

The ensuing years witnessed the strength of van Walt's convictions. Moving from country to country with his family — his father was a Dutch diplomat — he continued to study the situation in Tibet. As a teenager in New Zealand, he created an organization to help Tibetan refugee children. Returning to the Netherlands, he founded a Tibetan

advocacy group and published a successful magazine called the *Tibetan Messenger*.

By age 21, he had met the Dalai Lama personally; when the then-little-known spiritual leader expressed a desire to visit Europe, van Walt did the groundwork, organizing the Tibetan monk's first trip to the West in 1973.

Today van Walt, 41, is the sole legal counsel to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile. He is also the General Secretary of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization — a self-described "alternative UN" that may revolutionize notions of self-rule and sovereignty.

"I find it absolutely unbelievable," van Walt declared during a recent speech at San Francisco's Commonwealth Club, "that people like the Tibetans, the Kurds, and the elected leaders of Burma are not included in international discussions about their own fates. Each nation should have the right to decide its own destiny, and to manage its own environment."

The UNPO was created to assist peoples and nations which, despite their history and cultural integrity, have little or no representation on the international scene. The organization gives voice to the needs and aspirations of such nations, many of which have existed for centuries — but whose cultures, environments and human rights remain at the mercy of the states that have absorbed them.



The UNPO's advocacy often involves getting these nations' issues raised at the United Nations, monitoring elections and, recently, sending factfinding missions into disputed territories.

The UNPO held its first meeting at the Peace Palace in The Hague in February 1991. Fourteen nations and peoples, including Latvia and Estonia, made up the original roll. Today the organization counts 26 members, comprising nearly 50 million people. The most populous member nation is Kurdistan, with a combined population of some 25 million; the least, according to San Francisco office director Julie Berriault, is probably Belau, an island protectorate in the Pacific.

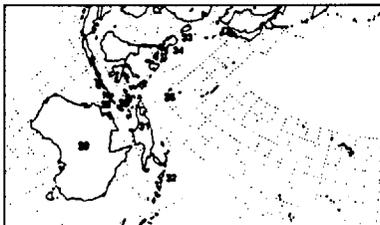
What all these nations and peoples have in common, and what served as one of the prime incentives for the founding of UNPO, is a keen sense of frustration.

"The representatives of these various peoples felt they were not being given a fair hearing," says van Walt. "It was virtually impossible for them to speak to governments within the United Nations system — even about human rights, the environment, or other issues that affect them. As a result of this frustration level, the desire to start using violence was growing — because that was a proven way for movements to attract attention. So it was decided to create an organization that would find out how to develop dialogues, attract attention, and get governments to listen without using violence."

Many small and/or isolated nations and peoples simply don't have the resources to play hardball in the global arena. Along with providing an international forum, the UNPO addresses this handicap by assisting member nations with diplomacy training, media relations and conflict-resolution skills.

One person who has found such training tremendously useful is Erkin Alptekin, leader of the Uyghur people in East Turkestan.

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Known in the West as the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of northwestern China, East Turkestan was invaded by the Chinese People's Liberation Army in 1949. Since then an estimated 360,000 of Alptekin's countrymen have been killed. The region now holds some 29 labor camps, with nearly 80,000 prisoners; Alptekin asserts that most of these are prisoners of conscience.

The area's natural resources are being diverted to Beijing, while population transfer of Chinese into the territory threatens to make the Uyghurs a minority in their own land. And there is mounting evidence that the Chinese government is using the Taklamakan Desert as a nuclear testing and dumping ground.

"Before joining UNPO, our hopes were slim," says Alptekin, a personable and articulate man with expressive eyes in a round, remarkably unlined face. "The Uyghurs have no one like the Dalai Lama, who is well known throughout the world. We are Muslims, but the Islamic countries could not support us; they had their own problems. And most Islamic countries have a close relationship with China.

"We didn't have many opportunities

to propagate our cause in the West," he says. "The UNPO helped us bring the plight of our people to the attention of the UN Human Rights Commission. And this visit to the United States has provided an opportunity for me to speak with senators and congressmen — and to help raise funds. This is really the only source of hope for our people."

One question bound to arise in any discussion of the rights of nations and peoples not represented by the United Nations is: what exactly is a nation? What constitutes "a people"? What prevents the owners of red Mustang convertibles or members of Star Trek fan clubs from deciding that they, too, are a distinct people with rights and privileges of their own?

"A feeling of solidarity and commonality really is the determining factor," agrees Michael van Walt. "But that feeling must be based on objective criteria such as a common language, history or ethnic background. What defines a nation, as distinct from a people, is the degree of political organization, legal status, and history of having been a separately governed entity."

There are 5,000 nations on the planet today — a figure that contrasts dramatically with the fewer than 200 member states of the United Nations. Almost all of the 5,000 nations are centuries or even millennia old, while most of the world's modern states were created within the last 50 years. Jason W. Clay, writing in *Mother Jones*, pointed out that most of today's shooting wars are actually struggles between indigenous nations and the states that have attempted to swallow them. Issues of basic autonomy (language, laws, religious rights, and land use) lie at the heart of almost all these conflicts — which are fabulously profitable for the select few.

"Nearly all the international debt accumulated by African states," Clay notes, "and nearly half of all other

Third World debt, comes from the purchase of weapons by states to fight their own citizens."

In some cases, of course, occupying states are perfectly capable of furnishing their own weapons. One of UNPO's most well-publicized cases is Tibet, which enjoyed a distinct language, government, and culture for at least thirteen centuries — until the Chinese Army invaded in the 1950s. Most of UNPO's other members are much less celebrated, although they face equal oppression and persecution. These include the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh; Bougainville, in the Solomon Islands; and the Cordillera, in the northern Philippines.

Along with its 26 full members, UNPO welcomes "observer" nations, which may decide to apply for membership. The criteria for joining are straightforward.

"Any organization which claims to represent a people and wants to join UNPO must reject the use of terrorism as an instrument of policy," van Walt says. "Secondly, they may only use UNPO for the purpose of promoting an agenda which is an alternative to violence. We will not help or support violent activities."

But even this criterion, van Walt qualified, is not always a black-and-white issue.

"The extent of violence used against indigenous people is sometimes so enormous and constant that it would be unfair to say that governments and states can use violence but that the people, in their quest for independence, cannot. An example is the West Papuans, who have been fighting for their freedom with bows and arrows and are being bombed from the air by the Indonesians. To tell the West Papuans that they can't fight back is something nobody in their right conscience could do."

Its realistic world view, as well as its sensitivity to the logistic needs of its members, makes the UNPO an attractive ally. Its membership is growing

— especially from the Americas. Interest has been expressed by the Mapuche of Argentina and Chile, as well as by the Assembly of First Nations: the political body of Canada's indigenous people, represented by the charismatic Obide Mercredi.

At UNPO's General Assembly in August 1991, ten new observer nations sent representatives, including three native American groups. These were the All-Indian Pueblo Council, the Mohawk nation, and the Lakota nation, which took the extraordinary step of declaring its independence from the United States in 1991.

"Indians everywhere, on the 70 million acres of their land, are discussing ... detailed plans for the renewal of their nation," David Seals of the

Lakota Sovereignty wrote in 1991. "They see this as no more preposterous than what Lech Walesa dreamed about ten years ago, or the Baltic leaders have said this past year."

UNPO's nascent association with the Lakota, though, points to an ironic dilemma that the organization will face with growing frequency in coming years. What happens when a nation or people is polarized into more than one faction? The Lakota Nation is one such case. Another is Kurdistan, UNPO's largest member nation, which sent representatives from each of its two political factions to the UNPO's last General Assembly.

"The two Kurdish parties sat at the same table," recalls Julie Berriault, "but they had only one vote. I don't



If the term "unrepresented nations and peoples" seems ambiguous, that's because it is. The ambiguity works to the UNPO's advantage; almost any disenfranchised population can imagine itself at home inside such an organization. In fact, the UNPO's roll embraces an amazing variety of political agendas. Looking down the list of members and observers one sees occupied countries, federated states, indigenous peoples, colonies, and both ethnic minorities and majorities. All of these groups have, of course, one thing in common: a keen desire for greater representation on the global scene.

UNPO's 26 current members, representing some 50 million people, are:

Abkhazia, Aborigines, Aceh, Albanians in Yugoslavia, Armenia, Assyria, Belau, Bougainville, Chechenskaya, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Cordillera, Crimea, East Turkestan, Georgia, Greeks in Albania,

Iraqi Turkoman, Kurdistan, Mari, South Moluccas, Taiwan, Tataristan, Tibet, West Papua, and Zanzibar. Estonia and Latvia are Supporting Members.

There are currently fifteen UNPO observers. These include East Timor, the Lakota Nation, the All-Indian Pueblo Council, the International Indian Treaty Council, Komi, Karen, Amazonia, Maa-sai, Barabaig, Quintin Lame, and the Mohawk Nation.

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know how they decided what to vote. It's very tough, but it comes with the territory. Situations like this will require that the members work out their differences, and present a united front to UNPO. But there's a problem with that. So many of them have been ruled under a 'divide and conquer' system that it's difficult — and a bit presumptuous — for us to tell them to get their act together, when some of these people can't even talk to each other. But other member nations, who have worked out similar problems, can help. Members have to help out other members.

"The whole issue is in process," she conceded. "It will be taken up at our third General Assembly in January 1993."

Eleven years ago, the first "Fourth World Assembly" convened in London. Four hundred representatives from minority nations and small communities attended, and a declaration calling for the decentralization of industrialized states was issued.

But despite its commonsense suggestions and ambitious goals — and the warm feeling of solidarity it nurtured among diverse native societies — the Assembly received scant attention from the global superpowers.

The UNPO has had to face the same hurdle. The bottom line for the organization is, of course, credibility: will mainstream governments take the agenda of upstart nations and peoples seriously?

A partial answer arrived in Estonia in January 1992, when UNPO conducted an unprecedented international conference on the issue of population transfer — an issue that is just now being defined as a form of human-rights abuse. Ten European and Eastern European governments attended the conference, taking part on an equal basis with UNPO's member nations.

"For many of these representatives of peoples," van Walt notes with pride, "it was the first time they were sitting

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at the same table with high-level government officials. In the past, you see, most governments have found it politically impossible to meet with representatives of governments that they consider to be opposition groups."

The organization has also drawn acclaim from international observers and national political figures.

"The philosophy and goals of UNPO are most praiseworthy," California Democrat Tom Lantos announced to the House of Representatives in a speech last September. "These peoples have the right to participate democratically in determining their fate, and to pursue their economic, social, and cultural development."

An example of this kind of participation occurred last June, when representatives from four of UNPO's member nations — including the Dalai Lama — traveled to Rio de Janeiro for the Earth Summit. From the point of view of indigenous peoples, the highly touted summit was little more than a bureaucratic morass. As a response, representatives of 92 nations created an alternative conference in Kari-Oca. The central achievement of that anti-summit was the Kari-Oca Declaration, an edict which links environment and development with the rights of first

peoples. The statement will serve as a foundation for further organizing in 1993, The Year of Indigenous Peoples.

With UNPO's growing credibility, the largest obstacle to its long-term success may be hard, cold economics. So far, funds for the organization have come from foundations and private donors, with a small proportion contributed by progressive governments, mostly in Northern Europe. Each member nation must contribute a yearly fee of \$1,000 — a largely symbolic sum which is waived in the case of extremely poor nations. The total full-time staff of UNPO consists, incredibly, of just three people: two in The Hague, and one in San Francisco.

But whatever UNPO lacks in financial solvency is compensated, for the time being, by the enthusiasm of its members and its strong body of interns and volunteers.

"These issues are cutting-edge," observes Berriault, who singlehandedly manages UNPO's Western Hemisphere activities. "A year ago, people were chuckling when they heard the name of our organization; now people are really pricking up their ears." Michael van Walt acknowledges the tremendous work — and financial risk — involved in keeping UNPO afloat. But the rewards, he insists, are commensurate with the trials.

"At the first General Assembly in The Hague," he recalls, "each member said something in their own language, to their own people. A telecast of the event was shown — probably by mistake — in Indonesia. The people of West Papua (occupied by Indonesia since 1963) saw their delegate announce, 'We will accept slavery no more!' And dancing broke out in the streets of West Papua.

"It's a very real thing for them," he says. "That's what motivates me and the staff to do this. We're not just playing around with lofty ideals and theories. For the members of UNPO, these are life-and-death struggles." ■

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