

# UN General Assembly

## D'Escoto's Active Year as President

By Katherine Hoyt

In June of 2008, former Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto received the unanimous endorsement of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States (GRULAC) as its candidate for the presidency of the sixty-third session of the UN General Assembly. He was then approved by the whole General Assembly as president for the one year duration of the session. In spite of his 75 years, D'Escoto took off running and has not stopped since.

In his speech opening the General Assembly session on Sept. 16, he called for the democratization of the United Nations. The next month, he named a task force headed by economist Joseph Stiglitz to suggest ways to establish a global economic order that served all peoples and nations. He caused controversy in December when he condemned Israel's violence in the Gaza Strip and called on the United Nations to take strong action there. In March 2009 he received the final report of the Stiglitz Commission and in April chaired a conference on the "new politics of food" based on the right to sustenance.

Miguel D'Escoto was born to a Nicaraguan family in Los Angeles, CA, but spent his childhood in Nicaragua. As a teenager, he returned to the U.S. to study. He was ordained a Catholic priest of the Maryknoll Order in 1961 and received a Masters Degree from Columbia University in 1962. He served poor neighborhoods in Chile in the 1960s. In 1970, he returned to the U.S. where he founded Orbis Books, the publishing arm of Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers.



*Miguel  
D'Escoto  
served as  
Nicaragua's  
Minister of  
Foreign  
Affairs in the  
1980s.*

In 1977, D'Escoto helped organize the Group of 12, formed by well-known Nicaraguans who spoke out against the Somoza dictatorship and in support of democratic change that included the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). After the Sandinista victory in July of 1979, D'Escoto was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, a post he held until the Sandinista electoral defeat in 1990. As Foreign Minister, he worked to bring Nicaragua's successful case against the United States for aggression against Nicaragua to the World Court and played a key role in the Contadora and Esquipulas Central American peace processes in the 1980s. At the time of his election to the presidency of the UN General Assembly, D'Escoto was senior advisor on foreign affairs to Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

In one of his first major actions as president of the General Assembly, D'Escoto on Oct. 30, 2008, inaugurated a high level task force to review the global financial system. He named as chair Joseph Stiglitz, winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2001 and a former chief economist of the World Bank. Stiglitz is well known to social justice activists because he denounced the neo-liberal measures pushed on poor countries around the world by the international financial institutions and the U.S. government saying they were based on ideology and did not work. Other members of the task force came from Russia, France, Egypt, the United Kingdom, Tanzania, Colombia, Ecuador, Barbados, India, Brazil, Japan, Nigeria, Germany, China, Malaysia, Belgium, Algeria and Cuba. The official name of the task force became "Commission of Experts of the President of the United Nations General Assembly on Reforms of the International Monetary and Financial System."

Soren Ambrose of Action Aid International noted that, "Fr. D'Escoto has taken an unusually bold and assertive stance as President of the General Assembly by setting up this panel. Of course he took office at a critical time in world economic history; what's impressive is that he responded so forcefully. The panel he created with Joseph Stiglitz has succeeded gathering a good cross-section of the most innovative ideas about the financial crisis and how to re-structure the global economy, and is doing a good job -- despite the handicap of having little support from big powers or even the Secretary-General -- of making sure these ideas cannot be ignored. He has also done an unusually good job of involving civil society, and not ignoring their input once they've made it."

Among the groups that would be well known to Monitor readers making contributions to the document were: Jubilee South, Jubilee USA Network, Consumers' Union, Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, Oxfam International, RESULTS, the World Council of Churches, and World Wildlife Fund-UK among many others.

The group's recommendations were released on March 19. The report said that developed countries must take action to stimulate their economies in ways that would address the effects of the economic downturn on the poor and that developing countries needed additional, more permanent and stable funding that was not subject to inappropriate conditionalities, such as those imposed by the IMF. The report criticized trade agreements which "contain commitments that circumscribe the ability of countries to respond to the current crisis with appropriate regulatory and macro-economic reforms."



*D'Escoto named Joseph Stiglitz to head a commission on how to change the financial system to help all the world's people.*

The report further recommended free access for products from the less developed countries into markets of the developed countries, an end to export subsidies by the rich countries, as well as an immediate end to cotton subsidies. It called for real and substantive regulatory reforms that "go beyond the financial sector to address underlying problems in corporate governance and competition policy." The Commission emphasized the need for major reforms in the governance of the international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, giving greater voice to developing countries.

To resolve the current crisis, "there must be some global regulatory framework to establish minimum national standards and also govern the global operation of systemically relevant global financial institutions." The report notes that a number of countries may face difficulties in meeting their external debt commitments as the crisis worsens and debt rescheduling becomes more difficult and calls for the development of an equitable sovereign debt restructuring mechanism, which would allow countries to declare bankruptcy as companies can.

The report calls for a new trade "round" that "truly promotes growth in the developing countries" and preserves the "long recognized principle of special and differential treatment of developing countries." Finally, it expresses the need for more investment in development and "to address the long run challenges of responding to climate change" including funds from a carbon tax that would be used to support the developing countries costs of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Ambrose says, "The task now is to make sure that these ideas, now that they're in the public debate, cannot be ignored. Civil society groups will have a role to play in that work, as will formations like the G-77-plus-China. The June 1-3 summit [on the global financial crisis] will either be the end of the process or the beginning of mounting a real challenge to the entrenched neo-liberal, market-fundamentalist assumptions of the global economy." On April 7, the General Assembly approved a resolution inviting the leaders of the 192 UN member states to the June summit at which, according to D'Escoto, they, not just those of the Group of 20, "will have an opportunity to participate equally and fully in the common search for solutions that meet the concerns and needs of all countries, large and small."

D'Escoto's statements insisting on the role of the United Nations in promoting compliance with humanitarian law and respect for all peoples, including Palestinians, has made him the target of verbal attack by the right wing. In early November 2008, several weeks after Israel began a blockade of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip, D'Escoto spoke out strongly at an event commemorating the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. He said "What is being done to the Palestinian people seems to me to be a version of the hideous policy of apartheid."

He added, "The State of Israel, founded ... in 1948, celebrates 60 years of its existence; shamefully, there is still no Palestinian State to celebrate." "I believe," D'Escoto said, "that the failure to create a Palestinian state as promised is the single greatest failure in the history of the United Nations." In response Jewish Council on Public Affairs Chair Andrea Weinstein called D'Escoto's comparison of Israeli policy to apartheid "abhorrent."

Then, on Dec. 12, 2008, Israeli authorities prevented Richard Falk, the UN Special Rapporteur on Israeli conduct in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (who is a professor emeritus of International Law at Princeton and a Jew), from entering Israel because of his "vehement statements." D'Escoto spoke up again, this time calling Israel's action "arbitrary" and calling for an international boycott of Israel. He also said that he had been the target of death threats on the internet which his staff was investigating.

Israeli Ambassador to the UN Gabriela Shalev, upon hearing D'Escoto's statement after the Falk expulsion, called off a scheduled meeting with him. The ambassador's spokesman said, "The role of the president of the General Assembly should be to unite the international community and promote shared interests and values. However, since his first days as president of the General Assembly, Mr. D'Escoto has been divisive and controversial, abusing his position." The reference to "his first

days as president” probably was about D’Escoto’s embrace of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad after the latter addressed the General Assembly in September. Conservative US Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) said in a statement referring to D’Escoto that the UN “has been hijacked by forces that undermine human rights and attack free countries, including the United States and Israel.”

On Dec. 27, D’Escoto released a statement that which said that the Israeli bombing of Gaza represented “severe and massive violations of international humanitarian law as defined by the Geneva Conventions, both in regard to the obligations of an occupying power and in the requirements of the laws of war.” He said that those violations included collective punishment, targeting of civilians and disproportionate military response, adding that, “Time has come to take firm action if the United Nations does not want to be rightly accused of complicity by omission.”

Conditions only worsened when two United Nations schools and the refugee headquarters of the UN were hit by Israeli bombs with substantial loss of life. At a Jan. 15 emergency UN meeting D’Escoto questioned the continued participation of the United Nations in the so-called “Quartet,” an international coalition seeking a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian question. He said that the United States, the European Union and Russia, the other members of the Quartet, could choose to ignore the opinion of the International Court of Justice that Israeli actions violated fundamental human rights norms, but the United Nations could not and should not.

He said, “We, the United Nations, must call for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire and immediate unimpeded humanitarian access. We, the United Nations, must stand with the people around the world who are calling, and acting, to bring an end to this death and destruction. We must stand with the brave Israelis who came out to protest this war, and we must stand with those in the frightened [Israeli] city of Sderot who called for “Another Voice” to answer the fear of rocket-fire with reconciliation and not war.”



*D’Escoto condemned the Gaza attacks but also said, “We must stand with the brave Israelis who came out to protest this war.”*

When he took office, D’Escoto had said that one of his principal goals was the democratization of the United Nations. On Feb. 19, the General Assembly began a closed door meeting to launch negotiations to reform the UN Security Council to better reflect the present situation in the world. The Council has 15 members, including 10 non-permanent members elected for two-year terms and which represent regions of the world, and five permanent members with veto power which are the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France. In a letter D’Escoto told the 192 ambassadors to the UN that the first round of talks would include the controversial issue of the different categories of Security Council membership and the equally prickly issue of the veto and regional representation.

Among the proposals presented at the last conference on the subject was that of the African Union which argued that Africa with 53 countries was the only continent without a permanent seat on the council. The AU wanted to add 11 new seats, six permanent seats including two for Africa with veto power, and five non-permanent seats. The Group of Four—Germany, Japan, Brazil and India—wanted permanent seats without veto rights on a 25 member council. And a group of countries which included Italy and Pakistan wanted a 25 member council with 10 new non-permanent seats.

The Obama administration has indicated that it is open to Security Council reform and to a permanent African seat on the Council but has not taken a decision on the subject. In an apparent break from the past, the State Department recently said that the US was not linking Security Council reform to other aspects of UN reform, which previous administrations have tried to do. One has only to remember the efforts of ultra-conservative John Bolton appointed by President George W. Bush in 2005.

Although previous negotiations on restructuring and democratizing the UN have come to naught, those efforts didn’t count on the energy and commitment of Nicaragua’s Miguel D’Escoto!