

Top UN Official Speaks at Mayor's Dinner

Gillian Sorensen discusses myths and misconceptions about the UN

[Zdravka Todorova](#) Oct . 20 . 2003

Gillian Sorensen, Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations for External Relations, delivered the keynote speech at the 33rd Annual Kansas City Mayor's United Nations Day Dinner on October 14.

Sorensen was appointed in 1997 by Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UN. She is responsible for outreach to parliamentarians, academics, religious leaders, non-governmental organizations and other groups who work for peace, human rights and development. Sorensen's address dealt with the relevance and role of the UN in the 21st century and discussed what she called "myths" about the UN.

Sorensen first challenged the misconception that the UN deals only with peacekeeping, claiming this particular duty only represents about 20% of the UN's agenda. She also pointed out that peacekeeping is not only going on in Iraq, as some would believe. Sorensen reminded the crowd of over 200 that the UN is currently conducting 15 peacekeeping operations.

Another peacekeeping myth addressed was that United States soldiers are serving under foreign command when participating in UN peacekeeping operations. Sorensen pointed out that American soldiers are a part of the UN forces while the operation lasts. She reminded the crowd that this is nothing new, and that operational control under a foreign commander had been practiced in past wars, such as World War II.

According to Sorensen, it is not the case that US soldiers are carrying the burden of peacekeeping. She stated that the Canadian, the Dutch, the Pakistani, the British, the Irish, the Bangladeshi, for example, offer more peacekeeping soldiers than the US.

Further, Gillian Sorensen addressed the concern that the UN performs as a form of world government. She stressed that this is "impossible, because UN has no financial resources, no endowment and trust funds, no power to tax or to borrow."

Sorensen also addressed other issues dealing directly with the UN and the US. One such issue is the perception that the UN is anti-American. She emphasized that the "opposite is true". According to Sorensen, the US is a recognized role model who sets standards worldwide. She claims there is a desire for American leadership in the UN.

Another point in Sorensen's speech was toward the perception that the UN is too costly to the US. The Assistant Secretary-General stated: "the costs for the US amount to a \$1.35 per person for a year", and called this cost "affordable." She reminded the audience that currently US is spending \$400 billion on defense for a year.

Sorensen went on to point out that the US has refused to sign "major international treaties which were signed by most countries of the world." These treaties include: The Conference on the Right of the Child; The Commission on Discrimination against Women; The Kyoto Treaty on Climate Change; The Law of the Sea; The Treaty on Land Mines and the International Criminal Court. Sorensen went on to call the US position with regard to international treaties one of "exceptionalism". She emphasized the importance of participation in such international treaties by the US, as well as other nations.

"The UN is the mechanism by which nations have the opportunity to solve problems by agreement rather than by force," Sorensen said.

In addition, Sorensen called for recognition of the achievements of the UN not only in the area of peacekeeping, but also in areas such as democratization and humanitarian relief. She called the UN an indispensable organization, providing a framework to nations for working on common issues.

"I do not know of any organization that has to do so much with so little resources", Sorensen said.

Other events at the dinner, held at the Adam's Mark Hotel included a proclamation of UN Day in Kansas City by Mayor Kay Barnes and a recognition of the World Citizen Award Winner, Dr. Frank Koranda.

This event is organized by the UN Association of Greater Kansas City and is held annually to celebrate the achievements of the UN. On the committee this year were Daniel Stoll, UMKC Director of the International Center for Foreign Academic Programs and Karen Vorst, English Department Chair and Economics Professor.

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