

Diplomacy for Peace

An interview with Jan Eliasson,
deputy secretary general of the United Nations

A VETERAN IN THE FIELDS OF DIPLOMACY AND FOREIGN RELATIONS, Jan Eliasson has served at some of the highest levels within the United Nations (UN). From 1980 to 1986, Eliasson was part of the UN mission mediating the Iran-Iraq War. From 1988 to 1992, he served as Sweden's permanent representative to the UN in New York, where he also served as the secretary-general's personal representative on Iran/Iraq. In 1991 Eliasson was chairman of the UN General Assembly's working group on emergency relief. In 1992 he was appointed as the first UN undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs, involved in operations in Somalia, Sudan, Mozambique, and the Balkans. From 1994 to 1999 Eliasson served as Swedish state secretary for foreign affairs. From 2000 to 2005 he was Sweden's ambassador to the United States. In June 2005 he was elected president of the United Nations General Assembly. In 2006 he also served as Swedish minister for foreign affairs. In December 2006 then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan appointed Eliasson as a UN special envoy to Darfur, Sudan. He is now a member of the UN Advocate Group for the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Chair of WaterAid/Sweden. He began his new role as deputy secretary general of the United Nations on July 1 of this year.

IE: How did your experience as a foreign exchange student in the United States influence your career?

ELIASSON: My stay as an exchange student was a defining and decisive period in my life. I was part of an American family and built friendships with American students as well as other international students. Our bus tour around the States was a "mini UN" experience. The idea—later the conviction—grew inside me that I would work with international affairs the rest of my life.

IE: In your experience teaching at Uppsala University, you witnessed how international perspectives can enhance student learning. Why do students need exposure to others from different cultures and to become knowledgeable about international issues?

ELIASSON: International perspectives are necessary in any national education system in the world today. We live in a world where local and global go togeth-

er. We are growingly interdependent as nations and interrelated as people. Shakespeare reminds us in *Romeo and Juliet* that "there is a world outside Verona." If we do not realize this there is a danger that we will turn inwards and start regarding the world outside as a problem or a peril—and not as a possibility and a potential. By that we would create a false sense of security and a dangerous world of "Us" and "Them."

IE: How did you collaborate with Uppsala University and the Swedish Foreign Ministry to establish an exchange program? How does the exchange program work?

ELIASSON: Exchanges of students and diplomats started in the 1970s between Uppsala University and the Swedish foreign service. In the 1980s and 90s such programs also developed with other Swedish universities. I served as visiting professor at Uppsala and Gothenburg universities three times during and after my diplomatic



Jan Eliasson, deputy secretary general of the United Nations, addressed the International Luncheon during the 2012 NAFSA Conference in Houston, Texas.

career. It was very rewarding for me to meet students and pass on “the baton” to younger generations and share experience on issues like conflict resolution, mediation and negotiations as well as development, humanitarian assistance, and human rights.

IE: As the first UN under secretary general for humanitarian affairs in the early 1990s, you were involved in operations in Somalia, Sudan, Mozambique, and the Balkans. What was your role in initiatives on issues such as land mines, conflict prevention, and humanitarian action?

ELIASSON: The humanitarian mandate for the UN was established in December 1991 after a long and arduous negotiation in the UN General Assembly. I was the chair of these negotiations as Sweden’s UN ambassador. I did not know at the time that I was doing my own job description—I was appointed the first under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs in January 1992. The horrible disaster in Somalia was one of my first challenges as well as civil wars in the Bal-

kans and other parts of Africa. The plague of land mines was a shocking experience for me, leading to initiatives to limit their use and human consequences. Prevention was always—and still is—a passionate interest of mine. I cannot understand why nations and people so often act only after the disaster. We could save so many lives, so much suffering, money and night sleep if we were to act on the first signs of situations going wrong instead of waiting and delaying action.

IE: From 2000–2005, you were the Swedish ambassador to the United States. During this time, were there any achievements that you are especially proud of in regard to building relationships between Swedish and U.S. higher education institutions?

ELIASSON: When serving in Washington as ambassador, my wife, the then science counselor at the Embassy, and I, promoted a number of contacts with American science and education institutions. These were mainly to be found in Washington: the agencies, the White House science experts, who also

brought us into contact with representatives of American higher education institutions. My wife was closely working with these agencies, and they were instrumental in giving her the support needed when reporting to Sweden about American science policy and the federal policies vis-à-vis higher education institutions. We also yearly hosted seminars and dinners for the American laureates receiving the Nobel Prizes.

IE: As a member of the advisory board on the Alliance for Peacebuilding, what is your opinion about including peace studies in university curricula or providing students the opportunity to gain exposure to peace studies through specialized study abroad programs?

ELIASSON: I would widen this to a need for studies in international affairs and global trends, generally. I would also like to remind of the benefits of language studies and of effective—and affordable—exchange programs. In a globalized world we need to enlarge networks among younger people. Personal friendships and meetings across borders are our best peace-keeping instruments. I also hope that the communications revolution and social media will be a positive force to bring people and nations together.

IE: You have been named the fourth deputy secretary general of the United Nations as of July 1, 2012. What do you hope to achieve in this role?

ELIASSON: I am honored and proud to be appointed deputy secretary general of the UN. It is a tough and challenging appointment. The world is facing serious political, economic, and environmental pressures. Multilateral action sometimes does not come easily—even if we should realize that good international solutions are in our national interest. I will work with issues related to war and peace as well as to development and building bridges to actors both inside and outside the UN.

Nobody can do everything, but everybody can do something. **IE**

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