

New York Times  
September 16, 2005

## Forget the U.N.: Clinton Has a League of His Own

By James Barron

Bill Clinton - former president, heart patient and fund-raiser for tsunami and hurricane victims - has a quartet of new causes.

And with more than 150 leaders in New York City for the 60th anniversary of the United Nations, he could not resist talking about them yesterday at what amounted to his own shadow summit meeting.

So there he was, on a hotel ballroom stage that had been made over to look something like the set of a daytime talk show, with deep-cushioned chairs that he and his guests - Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain and King Abdullah II of Jordan - could sink into. As the host, Mr. Clinton concentrated on the four topics of the Clinton Global Initiative, as the conference was called: poverty, religious conflict, climate change and governing.

Among other things, Ms. Rice, Mr. Blair and Mr. Clinton urged investment in Gaza. "There is a lot of poverty and despair" in Gaza, Ms. Rice said, but also "new hope and opportunities because of the Israeli withdrawal." King Abdullah called Gaza's economy "a major challenge."

But Mr. Clinton and his aides said the conference at the Sheraton New York Hotel and Towers was about more than discussions of "pro-poor investment strategies" and interfaith partnerships. The corporate executives and leaders of nonprofit groups who had been invited to attend were also invited to make specific commitments.

Mr. Clinton and his aides said that more than 50 commitments totaling \$300 million had already been made, including a \$100 million investment fund for businesses in Africa, and that they expected more by the time the three-day session ended tomorrow with speeches by Secretary General Kofi Annan of the United Nations and Mr. Clinton. Aides to the former president said that Mr. Clinton and his staff would keep in touch with the pledge-makers to see that the commitments were carried out.

Echoing that idea, Mr. Clinton said the conference was "more than a photo opportunity, more than business as usual."

"All of us come to meetings, we study issues, we say what we think and too often we complain when the governments that we seek to influence ignore what we think is our sound advice," Mr. Clinton said. The conference provided a platform for what he called an explosion of nongovernmental organizations and individuals trying to solve problems across national borders.

Some of those in the audience worked in the Clinton administration, among them Richard C. Holbrooke, a former ambassador to the United Nations, and George Stephanopoulos, a former adviser who is now host of the ABC News program "This Week."

The Rev. Jesse L. Jackson also attended the ballroom session. But not everyone on the conference schedule has Clinton connections. Besides Ms. Rice, the conference schedule says that Paul Wolfowitz, the World Bank president and the former deputy secretary of defense, will be on hand.

For many of those attending the conference, yesterday began with a wait in a long line. Everyone had to be photographed for the laminated passes needed to get into the sessions during the day. Many of those who registered also received a white canvas bag stuffed with more than just a ballpoint pen and a notepad. Among other items, it contained compact discs, including one by Mario Frangoulis, and a Nokia cellphone.

"Isn't this awesome?" said Ryan Carlson, the director of the Foundation for Reconciliation in the Middle East, a London-based group that, among other things, has supplied generators to a church in Baghdad. Pulling the cellphone out of its box, he said, "They haven't even marketed this in the states."

Others in the line commended Mr. Clinton for spearheading such a gathering. "I think this is what he's best suited to do," said Richard Blackledge, the director of communications for Biodiesel America, which promotes using fuel made from vegetable oil. "Focusing on peace and the environment makes sense. How hot is it in New York in September? And Katrina? The Gulf Stream is slowing down, the glaciers are melting and it's time for everyone to wise up."

He said Biodiesel America had begun a school bus "initiative" - at a conference with the word initiative in its title, perhaps it was inevitable that that word would pop up often during the day - that would reduce carbon emissions from the nation's 390,000 diesel school buses. "The schoolchildren in American spend an hour and a half on buses every day, and more and more of them have asthma," he said. "We're basically poisoning the kids along the way."

After the day's workshops - and the ballroom session - the people attending the conference went to a reception at the Museum of Modern Art. Also on the schedule was an 11 p.m. reception for reporters covering the conference - no cameras allowed, the schedule said - at Nobu, on West 57th Street. There was no media advisory cautioning reporters not to stay out too late. The next event on the schedule was an 8 a.m. panel discussion.