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In international Geneva, one country is on everyone's mind

By Bianca Hall

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Geneva: The challenge for any first-time visitor to Geneva is to try not to visibly gawp at everything, and it was a challenge I failed dismally.

As our plane passed snow-covered alps on approach to the Swiss city, necks craned and first-time visitors gasped in awe. From my aisle seat, I let out a mortifying little "whoaa".

On the ground, you can see Mont Blanc's dramatic peaks from the city centre. The air is crisp and clean. It - and this may sound strange - *smells of oxygen*. The streets are immaculate.



An aerial view of Geneva, with the Jet d'Eau fountain and Lake Geneva. WWW.ALAMY.COM

This is a wealthy and meticulous city, full of high-achieving and internationally minded people. As the European capital of the United Nations system, Geneva is home to dozens of UN and Red Cross agencies, and hosts more than two-thirds of the UN's global activities. Almost half the population is made up of resident foreign nationals.

But there's also an underlying tension here. In private conversations and briefings, UN officials and NGO staff say the rise of populism and nationalism

around the world is threatening to derail the work done over decades by these high-minded globalists.

And almost every conversation comes back to one country: the United States.

The UN system traces its origins to the League of Nations, the largely ineffectual international organisation which failed to prevent World War II, and was dissolved in 1946.



Flags of the world fly at the United Nations offices in Geneva, Switzerland.

The system isn't without its own critics and limitations and, combined with increasing scepticism about its usefulness, is an increasing reluctance to pay for it.

Its funding comes from member states, each responsible for varying amounts depending on their population, gross national income and other factors. For a long time, the United States contributed the most.

US President Donald Trump however has been frank about his distrust of the multilateralism that has underpinned the international order after World War II. In his speech last week to the UN General Assembly in New York, he [called on world leaders to reject globalism](#) and embrace patriotism.



The United Nations is concerned about the current disunity among its members. JAYNE D'ARCY

His administration has sought to cut funding to a raft of UN programs, including the Population Fund. The White House also announced plans to withdraw hundreds of millions of dollars in commitments to UNICEF, the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights, human rights programs and agencies.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned in June that just one program facing funding shortfalls provided 8 million healthcare visits a year for vulnerable Palestinians, and emergency relief for 1.5 million people.



António Guterres
@antonioguterres

- Education for 500,000+ children
- 8M health care visits/year
- Emergency relief for 1.5M people

This is what's at risk because of @UNRWA's funding shortfall. Today I called on the international community to continue its vital support for Palestine refugees [un.org/sg/en/content/...](https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/...)



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In June, Guterres [warned member states](#) that the UN was facing a "financial crisis", driven largely by states' failing to pay their contributions in full, or on time. At stake, he said, was the capacity of the UN to provide peacekeeping forces, pay its staff, and fulfil its mandate.

It's no exaggeration to say the UN is facing something of an existential crisis. After all, how effective can an international order be if the world's superpowers stop participating in it?

The UN Association of Australia (UNAA) has in recent years been conducting a series of events and programs to spruik the benefits to Australians of international co-operation.

In June, a small group from the UNAA travelled to Geneva to attend briefings from high-level officials on the work the UN's agencies undertake and the challenges they face.

According to one particularly gloomy briefing, the challenges are immense - and not simply financial.

Europe, the official told us, is less engaged in the multilateral process than in years gone by. It is increasingly preoccupied with Brexit, stagnating economies, immigration and the rise of populism. The United States is inwards focused, and preoccupied with its trade war with China.

And yet, the problems the UN faces are increasingly global in nature: the uncontrolled movement of disease (epidemics), people, arms and the climate crisis.

"These are global issues; you can't solve these issues on a national level," the official said.

"The social and economic bases underpinning multilateral structures are out of date with populations and sentiment ... have you ever seen a headline, 'Let's save the UN'?"

For all of our sakes, perhaps we should.

The writer travelled to Geneva as a recipient of the 2019 Peter McMullin UN Association of Australia Study Tour Scholarship.



Bianca Hall



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