

## **U.N. NOTEBOOK: Keeping The Security Council Door Ajar**

By Barbara Crossette, *UN Wire*

Diego Arria, an innovative Venezuelan diplomat, hadn't occupied his country's newly acquired Security Council seat for very long in 1992 when he decided that something had to be done to penetrate the shroud of secrecy that surrounded almost everything the council did.

It was a watershed era. The power of the council and the scope of its activities were mushrooming after the end of the Cold War. But only the five permanent council members, with their own sources of information and long experience at United Nations politicking, seemed to be the winners. The 10 nations holding rotating seats -- and the rest of the world -- were often left in the dark as momentous decisions loomed.

Arria moved on three fronts. When his turn came to be council president, he began briefing the press on council business. To learn about crises first-hand, he took his fellow diplomats on trips to trouble spots. Within a decade, those two moves turned into traditions.

His third experiment has also been successful -- so much so that it alarms some governments that would rather not have the Security Council learn too much about their problems. This innovation, which added the term "Arria formula" to the lexicon of diplomacy, created a system by which a wide range of voices -- nations not on the council, nongovernmental organizations, policy experts, grassroots individuals -- could be heard by council members.

Meetings under this rubric take place in conference halls or other places of public access, away from the Security Council's suite of formal and informal meeting rooms. These meetings are not listed in the daily United Nations *Journal*, and the organization keeps no official record of them. Word soon gets around, of course. Once a council member agrees to sponsor an Arria formula meeting, all other council members are notified. Flags go up.

Since the Arria formula was first proposed in 1992, there have been

scores of these meetings, many of them requested by NGOs, including relief organizations and human rights groups. Arria's first guest was a priest from the Balkans who bore witness to atrocities.

Is the Arria formula now in danger?

Because these meetings frequently air information and opinions that nations have managed to keep out of the Security Council's purview, countries are now using diplomatic pressure to block or undermine Arria formula sessions. Last spring, India -- which is lobbying worldwide for a permanent Security Council seat -- torpedoed a meeting Mexico had planned to discuss Kashmir, a disputed territory not recognized as Indian or Pakistani by the United Nations. India, backed by Russia as a permanent council member, has kept this issue off the official docket for more than half a century. [Full disclosure: this writer, as a former foreign correspondent reporting from Kashmir, had been invited to take part, but declined.]

Diplomats planning to attend the meeting said that the Indian foreign ministry had put pressure on member governments directly, capital to capital, and often in very strong terms. When even the United States deserted its close neighbor Mexico, apparently not willing to upset India, the meeting was called off.

In October, the [International Women's Tribune Center](#) in New York, an umbrella organization for women's groups worldwide, also ran into obstacles when it planned an Arria formula meeting on involving women in issues of peace and security. The Security Council was due to take up the topic formally to mark the second anniversary of Resolution 1325, which supported a greater role for women in areas of conflict and peacebuilding. Women's organizations thought it would be useful for the council to hear from women in the field.

The International Women's Tribune Center lined up experts from the Indian state of Gujarat, where possibly 2,000 Muslims were slaughtered in early 2002 after 59 Hindu activists were burned to death in a train; from the Mideast, where both Israeli and Palestinian women had joined peace efforts; and from Africa, where women were working to alleviate the pain of civil wars.

Cameroon, president of the council for October, agreed to the meeting with some trepidation, said Isha Dyfan, director of the human rights and peace-building programs at the women's center. Singapore volunteered to moderate the event.

Days before the meeting, it all began to unravel. "The Gujarat woman was not allowed to speak," Dyfan said. "It was clear that it was Indian pressure." Then Singapore told the women that there was no room for the Mideast on the agenda.

That left the Africans. But Sabine Sabimbona from Burundi, a member of Parliament and of a women's peace group, was on an aircraft ready to depart for the first leg of her trip to New York when she was ushered off the plane. At the women's center, Dyfan said that a last-minute accusation that Sabimbona had not paid for her ticket was a politically motivated ploy. "In fact she had two paid tickets," Dyfan said.

That left only the Ugandan, Angelina Acheng. But at least that Arria meeting took place, albeit with four of the five invitees unable to speak except from the sidelines.

Arria, a former governor of Caracas and tourism minister of Venezuela and now a part-time adviser to Secretary General Kofi Annan, said in a recent conversation that five years ago he had faced another kind of challenge to his formula.

Developing nations, sensing an opening to the council that never existed before, proposed that any country should have the right to call such a session. Other nations dissented, fearing that compulsory Arria formula meetings would soon turn into unproductive rituals, much like General Assembly "debates."

In 1997, Portugal invited Arria, by then in private life in New York, to come back to the council and comment. "My view, fundamentally, was that if it isn't broken, you shouldn't fix it," he said he told the council. "If you overly structure the thing, you will fall back on the typical regulations of the United Nations, which made it impossible for the previous 45 years to hold this kind of meeting." The idea was dropped.

Arria, the founding editor of the Venezuelan newspaper *El Diario de*

*Caracas*, said that overcoming council secrecy was never easy. He recalled what happened when he tried to have his first press conference as council president during the 1992-93 period when his country held a council seat, amid the Balkans war and the beginnings of the long standoff with Iraq.

"On the first day of my presidency, I told my press attache: 'When we get finished with the Iraqi thing -- we had Tariq Aziz in town -- I'm going to meet the journalists,'" he said. "About half an hour later he comes to me and says: 'The Secretariat says you cannot; the president of the Security Council never gives press conferences.'"

"Well, they were in for a surprise," Arria said. "I went to the journalist association and I sat there for an hour and a half and responded to a lot of questions. I could not believe how close the information was kept."

The attitude of a secretary general can be crucial, he said. Right now, Annan is running the most open administration the United Nations has seen in a long time, if ever. But what about the future, or the past?

Former Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in office from 1992 to 1997, adopted a policy of not allowing members of the Secretariat to attend informal consultations, the closed-door sessions at which most important Security Council decisions are made before formal, open meetings take place. Only the secretary general's personal representative could attend, and he provided very little information. "Or by the time he got us information it was irrelevant," Arria said.

"Boutros was fanatical at that," he added. "Boutros actually stopped nonpermanent members from obtaining good, direct information from high officials. Of course he could not prevent the big powers, who always had access to him and all of them, but the rest of us were left without any information."

The council field trips were a way of collecting information without waiting for it to filter through the Secretariat. Initially, they were made up of mostly nonpermanent members. By 2000, however, U.S. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke was taking a very high-powered delegation, including the envoys of the United Kingdom, France, Mali, Namibia, the Netherlands and Tunisia, on an extensive voyage of

discovery around the Democratic Republic of the Congo and to almost all the other countries whose governments were involved in the Congolese war.

All in all, said Isha Dyfan of the International Women's Tribune Center, the council has changed a lot because of Arria, and his innovations need to be protected. "Five years ago, we wouldn't have thought of going to the Security Council," she said. But she has also learned how things still get done around the United Nations. "Everything we do at the U.N. is a question of negotiating," she said. It's not free. Nothing of the sort."

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