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Class Year: 2020

Event: “A Conversation with Andrew Gilmour, Assistant UN Secretary-General for Human Rights and Head, New York Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,” October 30, 2018

Reflection:
As part of the “Something Old, Something New and Everything UN Blue” interview series Elpida Rouka is running, Andrew Gilmour came to speak at the Schell Center. He serves as the Assistant United Nations Secretary-General for Human Rights and the Head of the New York Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. For understandable reasons, the conversation centered largely around the efficacy and promise of the United Nations in promoting human rights norms, addressing concerns and violations, and preventing future catastrophe.

As the person in charge of Yale Model United Nations, I often feel comfortable in discussions regarding the failures and successes of past UN interventions, as well as well-versed in the global dynamics that underpin the UN’s operations. In other words, it does not surprise me to hear that impasses emerge in the Security Council because of Russian vetoes or that the Chinese Mission to the UN refuses to acknowledge certain human rights conventions. But, the trajectory Gilmour described for the world’s path ahead is disconcerting, and it was palpable that it left him uneasy, too. Prior to the past few years, the world was undergoing what Gilmour called a “human rights revolution” in which countries and global organizations were increasingly recognizing, solidifying, and ensuring the guarantees and protections of certain human rights. This revolution was spearheaded, in part, by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, particularly Mary Robinson in the early 2000s. Yet, that trend has been discontinued, and Gilmour cited the dismay of the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Raad Al Hussein, who has been vocal in his frustration with the dynamics in the UN. In fact, through a Schell Center breakfast I attended last semester, I heard from the Commissioner firsthand why these feelings of exasperation have surfaced, especially in relation to the UN’s seeming inability to thwart brutal regimes.

I was particularly shocked that not only has the UN been unable to stop some regimes, but it has also been complicit in certain human rights violations. Broadly, many of us know well about how the Security Council pulled out of countries such as Rwanda right before conflict escalated and reached its peak. But, Gilmour’s comments made me better internalize the extent to which the UN system has not simply been imperfect. Rather, it has been detrimental under some circumstances. For instance, Gilmour briefly touched on occasions in which UN peacekeepers handed over boys for execution as part of negotiations to enter warzones without retaliation. The decision-making, in light of ethical considerations, behind this type of compromise is impermissible and reprehensible from a system that prides itself on universal defenses of human rights. Granted, the peacekeeping operations are often run by soldiers from various member countries, and it was unclear if this type of compromise is often made strategically by the UN or if it really is an on-the-ground question in which the deployed peacekeepers act on their accord. Still, I left the conversation with an increased awareness of not simply the imperfections of the UN, but rather its ability to be transformed into a tool of oppression if not properly run.