

**Why You've Seen a Drop In Goodwill Ambassadors On New York's Party Scene:
U.N. Might Be Off the A-List Now, But Singapore Envoy Has Full Slate**

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Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore's ambassador to the United Nations, is a party animal -- at least by U.N. standards.

Last month, his social schedule featured a reception to celebrate Poland's national day and a dinner for the Canadian ambassador to the U.N. At one lunch, the guest of honor was the foreign minister of Liechtenstein.

There was a time when U.N. credentials imparted instant cachet, especially in New York social circles. Elite hostesses competed to snag the most important diplomats for their dinner parties. Robin Chandler Duke, who married into the family that founded Duke University, says that in the early 1960s, she tried to arrange a mansion for Adlai Stevenson, then the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., to live in. (He decided to reside in a hotel suite instead, she says.)

But high society, much like the world itself, has moved on. As the U.N.'s reputation has sunk in the eyes of many Americans, so, too, has the organization's appeal for New York's power party-givers. "My friends say, why do you bother?" says Connie Spahn, a trustee on the board of New York's Museum of Natural History, who says she is one of the few who still entertains U.N. diplomats regularly. "Socially, it's not a big plus" to have U.N. people in the mix, she says.

Some of this has to do with the controversy over Iraq that has turned some Americans against the U.N. Others say there is a feeling that the U.N. isn't the same influential institution it once was. "The average person doesn't think about the U.N.," says Mrs. Duke, who says she feels sad about this "diminishing attitude." Plus, there are simply more U.N. members in town: 191, in all, up from 159 in 1988. Many are from developing countries, operating on tight budgets. Ambassador Mahbubani says one embassy recently told him it was having trouble paying its electric bill.

The upshot: With the exception of Secretary-General Kofi Annan and his wife, Nane, whose dance cards are overflowing -- he was recently honored by the Aspen Institute, a public-policy group, and the couple attended the season opening of the New York Metropolitan Opera -- most diplomats and staffers spend much of their leisure time in an insular U.N. world, attending each other's events.

"They're just not on people's radar," says Paul Wilmot, a high-profile New York events planner. "There's a strange feeling the U.N. is almost a nation unto itself." Part of the problem, he says, is that most of the U.N.'s work today isn't "feel-good stuff."

Even Ambassador Mahbubani says that "the U.N. is a tribe." He adds: "It has its own tribal customs and tribal language and when they speak among themselves, New Yorkers don't understand."

Compared with most of his peers, Ambassador Mahbubani, 55, has some social entree. He is a member of the River Club, an exclusive Manhattan social club. He recently attended a literary tribute to author Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Married to an American lawyer, and the father of

three, he has been a guest at the home of diamond magnate Maurice Tempelsman and Indra Nooyi, president of PepsiCo Inc.

Yet even at its most frenetic, Ambassador Mahbubani's schedule takes him only so far off the U.N. path. His most frequent forays are to places such as the International Peace Academy or the Council on Foreign Relations, think tanks that are New York's de facto salons for the U.N. crowd.

Ambassador Mahbubani says New Yorkers don't appreciate the U.N. the way they do Wall Street since locals can't "count the dollars" the U.N. generates. He has been snubbed at cocktail parties, he adds, by guests trying to network with those they see as more important. "People have very specific targets and they're not interested in talking to you," he says.

In important ways, America's social elites and philanthropists have come to the U.N.'s aid throughout its history. The Rockefeller family donated the funds to buy the property on which the U.N. headquarters now sits. Eleanor Roosevelt provided the organization with years of good publicity with her work on behalf of the organization. Billionaire George Soros's support has included a \$36 million donation to a U.N. agency to aid Bosnia in 1993. And Ted Turner gave the U.N. a huge boost in 1997 when he handed the struggling institution a donation of \$1 billion that was going to be paid out over 10 years. (That has since been stretched to 15 years.)

More recently, at least two diplomats complain, they got snubbed by apartment co-op boards that don't want to sell to ambassadors -- on the theory they are transient. Anne Greenstock, wife of a recent British ambassador to the U.N., says she loved being in the city -- even though she found that New Yorkers hosting "glitzy" fund-raisers "wouldn't be interested in U.N. people because they weren't rich."

Pierre Helg, deputy ambassador of the Swiss delegation, says his social life in New York can't compare with the one he had in India, his prior diplomatic post, which ended in 2000. There, he says, people considered diplomats prestigious -- and he belonged to two fancy golf clubs, had 11 servants and a 360-square-meter residence.

These days, Mr. Helg says he lives "like a student" in a two-bedroom apartment. He takes the subway to work and golfs on a public course.

In Mr. Mahbubani's case, there are strategic considerations to hobnobbing. Other ambassadors say he is on the short list of possible successors to Mr. Annan, who will step down in three years. While actively campaigning for the post can work against a candidate, moving in the right circles may help. "By being out, you run into influential people," notes Richard Holbrooke, former U.S. ambassador to the U.N.

Ambassador Mahbubani remains coy about his intentions. His friends, such as former deputy Canadian ambassador David Malone, say his name wouldn't be floating around unless he were interested in the job. Mr. Mahbubani says there are reasons why he gets asked to certain social functions. "If I were an idiot, even with the Secretary-General buzz, I wouldn't get invited."