Exclusive: U.N. Secretary-General Front-Runner Faces Internal Uproar

May 24, 2016

By Colum Lynch

Foreign Policy

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/24/aunty-helen-of-turtle-bay/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=Flashpoints>

Helen Clark, the U.N.’s development czar, has emerged as a front-runner in the race for U.N. secretary-general, inspiring international hopes that a powerful woman could lead the world’s preeminent diplomatic organization for the first time. Back home in New Zealand, where Clark served as prime minister from December 1999 to November 2008, the teenage pop star Lorde [declared](https://twitter.com/lorde/status/720664874104139779) she was “all in” for her “awe-inspiring fellow countrywoman.” Fans produced [T-shirts](https://twitter.com/wiis_nz/status/723374971410472961) proclaiming, “Aunty Helen for UN Secretary General.”

But many of her own U.N. colleagues are not rooting for her. Clark’s seven-year stewardship of the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) has left a trail of embittered peers and subordinates, who accuse Clark of ruthlessly ending the careers of underlings in her quest to advance her candidacy and of undercutting the U.N.’s promotion of human rights. In the most controversial move, Clark’s top managers allegedly drove one UNDP official out of her job in retaliation for participating in an investigation that sharply criticized the agency’s response to mass atrocities in Sri Lanka, according to internal U.N. emails and several current and former U.N.-based officials and diplomats. The offices of the deputy U.N. secretary-general and a top aide to U.N. chief Ban Ki-moon lobbied Clark’s office to rescue the UNDP official’s career, but they were unsuccessful.

UNDP denies it retaliated against the employee or that Clark played any role in denying her a job. Clark’s supporters concede her popularity may have taken a hit after she led a traumatic [restructuring](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/articles/2014/06/13/UNDP-changing-to-become-more-effective-and-efficient.html) of the development agency from September 2013 to September 2015, sacking more than 200 staffers at UNDP’s New York headquarters, part of an effort to thin the ranks of senior management in New York. But they say it is a testament to Clark’s leadership that she had the grit to undertake such painful cuts — something that few other U.N. managers have achieved. Even her detractors say she has been a tenacious advocate for her agency’s interests. “She is one of the most aggressive turf warriors the U.N. has ever seen,” one senior diplomat said.

But there have also been casualties during her tenure, notably Lena Sinha, a Swedish-American dual citizen, who was forced out of UNDP after helping craft a landmark report on the U.N.’s shortcomings in the final months of the Sri Lankan civil war, ending a 15-year career there.

Sinha’s fall from grace — which has not been previously reported — highlights a broader resistance within the U.N. development agency to play a more proactive role speaking out against human rights abuses in overseas missions. UNDP manages the most senior officials in most of the U.N.’s far-flung offices, and U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and human rights advocates believe the agency should play a more pro-active role in spotting and reporting abuses before they erupt into full-blown crises.

More than four years ago, Sinha was appointed to serve as chief of staff on a high-profile panel producing a report on the mass atrocities in Sri Lanka. The [Petrie report](http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Sri_Lanka/The_Internal_Review_Panel_report_on_Sri_Lanka.pdf) — named after the lead author, Charles Petrie, a former U.N. official and occasional advisor to the U.N. chief — provided a damning account of the U.N.’s “systemic failure” to advocate for the protection of hundreds of thousands of Tamils caught in the line of fire in the final months of the country’s brutal civil war in 2009. It criticized senior officials in New York, as well as UNDP’s leadership team in Colombo, charging they routinely downplayed the extent of the Sri Lankan government’s complicity in killing the vast majority of the more than 70,000 civilians who died in indiscriminate shelling. The U.N. team in Sri Lanka “did not perceive the prevention of killing of civilians as their responsibility — and agency and department heads at UNHQ were not instructing them otherwise,” according to the Petrie report.

The Petrie report was endorsed by the U.N. chief, and its recommendations formed the basis of Ban’s push to step up the U.N.’s human rights advocacy around the world. In November 2013, Ban launched his “Human Rights Up Front” initiative, which instructed all U.N. agencies to place the protection of civilians from atrocities at the forefront of their missions and to speak out publicly when abuses occur.

The undertaking had enormous implications for UNDP, which administers a stable of more than 130 resident coordinators who serve as the face of the United Nations in most countries. First, it placed greater pressure on the officials — many of whom are primarily responsible for running development programs — to take on a stronger role in promoting human rights. But it also risked complicating their relations with host governments, many of which see the promotion of human rights as an unwelcome challenge to their sovereignty. A sharp rebuke of a country’s human rights abuses can get a resident coordinator expelled, jeopardizing the U.N.’s development and humanitarian operations there.

The Petrie report’s release infuriated UNDP’s brass, who felt it maligned the U.N. development agency, presented an unfairly harsh account of UNDP’s top official in Sri Lanka, and posed a potential threat to its leadership in far-flung operations.

“It seems that UNDP, and Helen Clark in particular, took the Petrie report personally,” said Edward Mortimer, who served as a top advisor to former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan. But “even if you think the report is wrong it is not a reason to discriminate in giving them a job.” Mortimer, who became an active proponent of human rights in Sri Lanka after leaving the United Nations, served as an informal advocate for Sinha, bringing her case to the attention of officials in Ban’s office.”

In a confidential point-by-point rebuttal obtained by Foreign Policy, UNDP rejected some of Petrie’s key findings. It claimed the Petrie report was deeply flawed and that its authors were not “sufficiently rigorous” in their assessments of the U.N.’s alleged failings. It accused Petrie’s team of citing documents out of context and failing to consult sufficiently with UNDP or other agencies. It pushed hard against plans by Petrie that would dilute its control over the U.N.’s field operations, including a proposal to strengthen the role of the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, saying what was needed was more money to fund the U.N.’s response in the face of crisis.

“Only UNDP in the entire UN system has the operational presence, capacity and broad development and policy mandate, and financial resources to manage the RC [resident coordinator] system,” the confidential UNDP report stated.

The Petrie report, meanwhile, fueled resentment that one of UNDP’s own had played a role in the report.

Word quickly filtered around UNDP’s New York headquarters that Sinha was finished.

Sinha would later recall in a July 2015 email to a UNDP human resources official that two days after the formal release of the Petrie report she was “informed that UNDP had convened a ‘high-level crisis meeting’ regarding the Sri Lanka report, with the findings and recommendations, and my role therein, discussed, and that it was said that ‘I would never work for UNDP again,’” according to the email, which was reviewed by FP.

Christina LoNigro, UNDP’s press secretary, said no such decision had ever taken place. She said Sinha had simply been unsuccessful finding a New assignment. Another senior official reached out to FP after learning it was investigating the case claimed that Sinha had not faced retaliation. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that while Sinha was a smart and capable official she lacked the kind of extensive field experience needed to rise in UNDP. “I don’t think she was retaliated against.”

Still, after 15 years of employment with the development agency, UNDP’s top managers stopped offering her new assignments. She applied for more than half a dozen UNDP jobs but failed to even get shortlisted. Shortly after, Sinha was placed on leave without pay.

In the meantime, Sinha took up an unpaid job at the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, a New York-based human rights advocacy group, living off her savings and analyzing atrocities in Syria. She hoped the matter would blow over and that UNDP would ultimately welcome her back in. But that was not to happen, and after four years in limbo, she accepted a severance package earlier this year and left.

“I was, of course, shocked by the developments following the completion of the Sri Lanka review,” Sinha told FP. “I tried to remain with UNDP,” she added, but “as it became clear that I would be unsuccessful in obtaining further regular appointments, I agreed to voluntary termination of my permanent contract with the U.N.”

Petrie — a veteran U.N. player who once worked for UNDP — characterized UNDP’s treatment of Sinha in an email to FP as “an extraordinary demonstration of vindictiveness and abuse of authority.”

“At the time I thought the whole approach was extraordinarily stupid,” he added. UNDP, he noted, was in the midst of launching a management reform that would result in scores of job cuts. “They could have discreetly terminated her contract a few months later as part of the reform. But I wasn’t surprised by the way Lena was treated. It fits a very familiar pattern.”

Petrie said it was his “understanding that the message conveyed to Lena, of never being able to find work with UNDP, followed a senior management meeting with Helen Clark.”

UNDP’s LoNigro, denied that Clark played any role in the decision to deny Sinha employment, saying, “issues related to her employment status were dealt with at the working level in the organization and not at the level of or at the instruction of the administrator.”

Either way, the controversy was subsequently brought to her office’s attention by Ban’s office, which sympathized with Sinha’s plight. U.N. Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson and Susana Malcorra, Ban’s chief of staff at the time and currently a candidate for secretary-general herself, reached out to Clark’s office to urge UNDP to back down, according to emails and sources briefed on the exchanges.

Ban’s office learned about Sinha’s situation as early as November, 2012. His top advisors grew concerned that a high-profile case of potential retaliation against a U.N. staffer who had participated in the Petrie report would undermine public confidence in the U.N. chief’s initiative.

In July 2013, several months before Ban was due to launch his human rights initiative, the secretary-general’s office contacted Clark’s office to raise concern about the political implications of a public battle over Sinha’s case. A short time later, Sinha received a call from UNDP’s human resources office. It had found a temporary assignment reviewing UNDP staff diversity policies. That assignment was extended until the fall of 2013. But a full-time job never materialized.

Several sources that had been briefed by Ban’s office said that both Eliasson and Malcorra had spoken directly to Clark. According to those accounts, Clark said she was unaware of Sinha’s case but that she would look into it.

UNDP denied that either Malcorra or Eliasson had spoken directly to Clark about the matter. “UNDP, not the administrator, was asked about the status of the staffer in question,” LoNigro said. “No link was made to Human Rights Up Front, and the response from UNDP was that she had been unsuccessful in job fairs.” Stephane Dujarric, a spokesman for the U.N. secretary general, said “we have no recollection of direct contact” between Eliasson and Clark.

Human rights advocates tracking the case said it was travesty of justice that those who were criticized in the report suffered no disciplinary action while Sinha saw her career destroyed.

“UNDP has it tragically backward, apparently retaliating against a staff who helped document the U.N. failings in Sri Lanka, while promoting staff who were actually responsible for those failings,” said Philippe Bolopion, the deputy director for global advocacy at Human Rights Watch.

Bolopion claimed UNDP has resisted Ban’s efforts to strengthen the U.N.’s human rights advocacy and that the Sinha case sent a chilling message to any U.N. employee who might be tempted to speak about the world body’s human rights failings.

“Ban Ki-moon can promote ‘Human Rights Up Front’ all he wants, but UNDP has been notoriously slow getting on board,” Bolopion said.

UNDP’s LoNigro challenged that assessment, saying Clark was appointed co-chair, along with Eliasson, of a high-level working group implementing Human Rights Up Front, testifying to Clark’s commitment to implementing Ban’s human rights initiative.

“We expect resident coordinators to recognize and respond to serious human rights concerns and their cause, and will provide you with support in doing so,” Clark and Eliasson wrote in a July 29 joint letter to UNDP’s resident coordinators.

Following the launch of the Human Rights Up Front initiative, UNDP’s resident coordinators received special new training on the issue. “As a result, human rights have a more prominent role in the world of the U.N. country teams than ever before,” LoNigro said.

But human rights advocates and many officials in the U.N. say they remain unconvinced.

One U.N. official raised concern in an email to a colleague that Clark had used her position to weaken some of the U.N.’s chief most important initiatives, and to veto any policy that challenged UNDP’s interests.

For instance, the official noted, Clark and her aides sought to dilute a key proposal to deploy teams of human rights experts and conflict specialists to countries beset by a sudden influx of violence. The idea was that these teams — operating under the authority of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the U.N.’s top political adviser — would have greater freedom to promote human rights. But Clark’s team pushed back, demanding that the UNDP administrator provide “clear direction” to any such human rights team, according to an email from a UNDP official involved in the internal negotiations. Clark’s office also fought internally to ensure UNDP staffers secured most of the resident coordinator posts. Current or former staffers from UNDP currently have about 50 percent of such posts, far more than any other U.N. agency.

Human rights advocates inside and outside of the U.N. have also voiced frustration that the lessons of Sri Lanka have yet to be learned at UNDP. In Myanmar, for example, the UNDP-led mission has come under criticism for inadvertently abetting a system of government-sponsored discrimination against the country’s minority Muslim Rohingya population, and failing to speak forthrightly enough about abuses against the group. More than 100,000 Rohingya have [fled](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36353439) the country in recent years, and those that remain face pervasive discrimination.

“The U.N. Secretary General’s ‘Human Rights Up Front’ doctrine was aimed at helping the U.N. system and others learn from the mistakes of Sri Lanka (among others) and avoid allowing this subservient attitude toward the state become an excuse for aiding and abetting abuses,” stated a confidential October 2015 independent report, commissioned by the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and obtained by FP. “It is difficult to see that learning in this respect is happening effectively….The situation bears a striking resemblance to the humanitarian community’s systemic failure in the final stages of the war in Sri Lanka.”