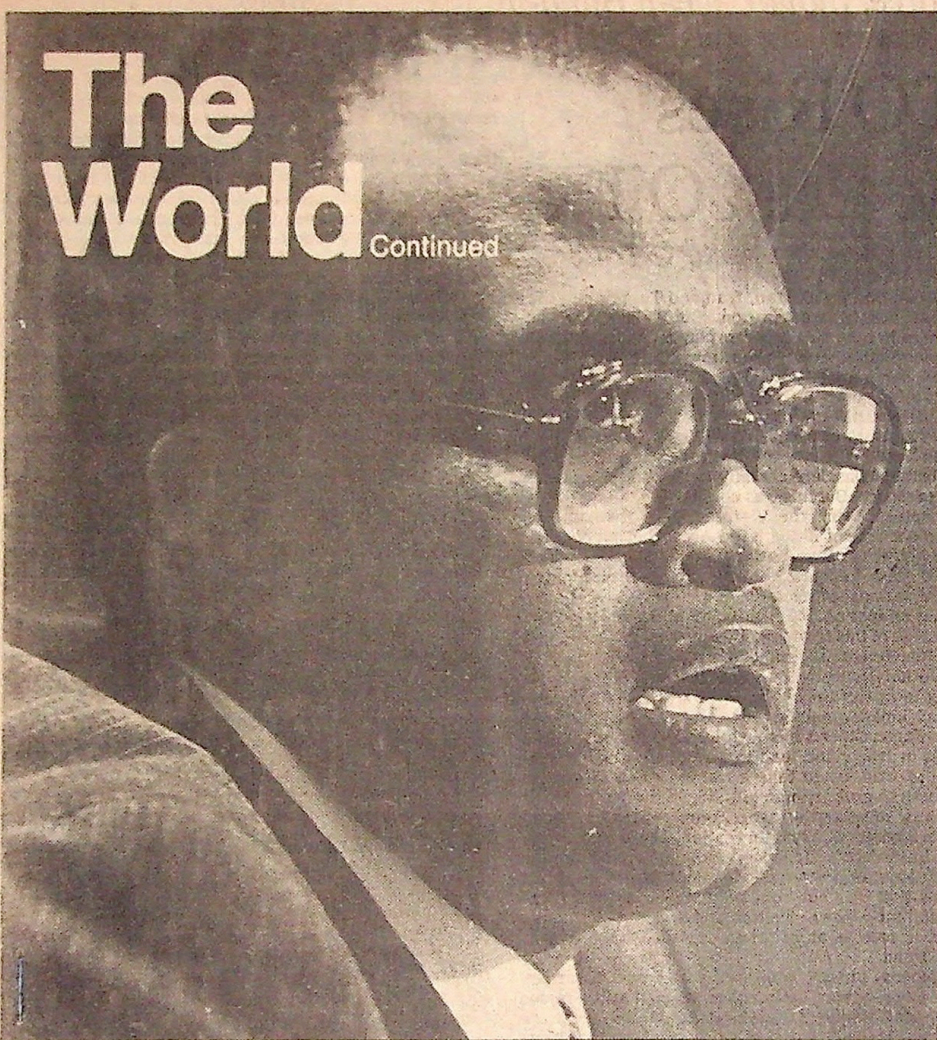


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Salim Ahmed Salim at the United Nations.

# Time Isn't of the Essence, Assembly President Finds

By BERNARDD. NOSSITER

UNITED NATIONS, N.Y. — Salim Ahmed Salim, the affable, chunky, young Tanzanian career diplomat who presides over the General Assembly, likes to make trains run on time — and in his direction. Last week, he was derailed.

As Assembly president, Mr. Salim was determined to make a name for himself as a brisk manager, a man who would push United Nations committees to finish their work, start sessions punctually, compress windy debate. He was not going to repeat last year's lackadaisical Assembly, when meetings set for 10:30 began near noon and all hands had to be called back for two weeks in the New Year to finish voting on the endless stack of resolutions.

To be sure, the world is not much altered by what the Assembly does or leaves undone. It is often and mistakenly called a parliament of nations. It is not, because its resolutions bind no one. It is rather a continuing negotiation where 152 governments vent their sentiments, prejudices and opinions.

Indeed, the only concrete achievement of this year's Assembly is a global treaty to outlaw the

ing of hostages, compelling signers to prosecute or extradite offenders. But whatever the body did, Mr. Salim was determined that it would stop on his schedule and adjourn on Dec. 18.

Now his plans have come apart because Cuba and Colombia are deadlocked in their struggle for a seat on the Security Council. Cuba has led all the way but is still about 10 votes short of the two-thirds required for election. This is precisely the sort of impasse that an Assembly president is supposed to resolve behind the scenes, pleading, cajoling, threatening and, above all, coming up with a magic compromise formula. Mr. Salim didn't. So he and the rest will reassemble the day after Christmas for an unprecedented 125th ballot.

In fairness, it is not clear that a Solomon, let alone a Salim, could resolve this affair. Unlike most issues at the General Assembly, something of consequence is at stake. The battle pits the United States and other democracies, plus about two-thirds of Latin America, against the Soviet bloc and most of the developing countries.

Because the presidency of the Security Council rotates according to the alphabet each month, the win- of a Cuba-Colombia fight would automatically

succeed China as president in January. The prospect chills United States and other Western diplomats. The January Council chief is likely to be entrusted with leading private and critical consultations over sanctions and other measures in the Iranian crisis. The West does not trust Havana's man, Raoul Roa-Kouri, in that job.

There is a simple way of resolving the deadlock and holding to Mr. Salim's timetable. The Assembly President could declare that no one had been elected and the Council would then sit with 14 instead of 15 members. Legal experts at the United Nations insist that a 14-member Council is legitimate, that as few as nine members are a valid body, provided they include the five permanent states — the United States, Soviet Union, China, France and Britain. The Council presidency would then have moved next month to France.

But Mr. Salim has repeatedly raised questions about the legitimacy of a Council with an empty seat. Declining to publish the experts' view, he exhorted the voters in his Assembly to decide. Ambassadors backing both sides have seen in this, and other moves Mr. Salim has made, an effort to pry loose the last 10 or so votes Cuba needs for victory. Colombia's critical handful of Arab and African supporters, it is thought, would give up and go home. In fact, the whole electoral process here came under a cloud last week when the United States and Colombia warned that some delegations may have been casting more than one ballot.

Mr. Salim is understandably indignant about such "unfortunate speculations," as he calls them. "I have bent over backwards, in terms of procedure, to see the Colombian point of view more than even the Cuban point of view," he told reporters. "That type of speculation is most unwarranted and . . . unfair."

## Interceding with the East

Indeed, earlier in the session, he demonstrated that he is no pliant tool of the East by calling the Polish Ambassador in for a chat. Among other things, Mr. Salim discussed the case of a missing United Nations secretary, Alicja Wesolowska. She was arrested in Warsaw on Aug. 10 and has been held in solitary, grilled by military interrogators, ever since.

This was a bold move on Mr. Salim's part, not the sort of thing an Assembly president normally takes up with a member state. It is not known what Mr. Salim said, and he was embarrassed when word of his deed leaked through the vitreous walls of the world organization. But it is likely he told the ambassador how much distress the affair has caused other United Nations civil servants.

Nevertheless, Miss Wesolowska is still languishing in a Polish cell; and the Assembly hasn't finished on time. Cuba remains unelected. The power of an Assembly president is evidently limited.

At the margin, however, he can deflect the course of events. In private, Mr. Salim pleaded successfully with his African colleagues to do nothing that might interfere with the London talks aimed at settling the guerrilla war in Rhodesia. Against all odds, the Africans closed down their mimeograph machines until a settlement had been reached. Then Mr. Salim did bend his rules a bit to let the Africans rush through a resolution praising the guerrillas and damning Britain and the United States for lifting sanctions without a Security Council imprimatur. But those were typically impotent words, like another Assembly resolution condemning as invalid the Camp David accords that brought peace to Israel and Egypt.

Five years ago, another Assembly President, Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria, overrode his predecessors and engineered the expulsion of South Africa from the Assembly. He also staged a triumphant welcome and built a United Nations platform for Yasir Arafat, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Of course, Mr. Bouteflika could have done neither without the overwhelming support of the developing countries and the Soviet bloc. When they vote as one — which happens less frequently than the stereotyped view of the United Nations suggests — they are an irresistible majority.

A shrewd Dutch diplomat has said that an Assembly president's power derives from "his personality, intelligence and integrity." The able Mr. Salim now spend his brief holiday trying to determine how these characteristics can be translated into a formula that enables him to send the Assembly home.