



Gilles Simond/Edipresse

United Nations seeks to reach out to Geneva

By Peter Capella

Geneva - 21 April 2008 | 09:00

United Nations chief Ban Ki-moon will launch a new series of public events in Geneva next week, that will draw world figures to the city in an attempt to bridge a perceived gap between the UN and the local community. The senior UN official behind the Geneva Lectures says local inhabitants are detached from what goes on behind closed doors at the world body. But many internationals in Geneva also need to make an effort, he says.

The UN Secretary General will cut the "technical lingo" and speak "from his heart" about the importance of targets to cut poverty in developing countries, according to Carlos Lopes, the head of the UN's executive training and research institute. UNITAR, which is organising the Geneva Lectures, hopes that the first lecture and debate, by Ban Ki-moon at the Palais des Nations on April 29, will attract about 200 locals as well as the diplomatic and international community in the region. Lopes told Swisster that he is lining up Nobel laureates or politicians with worldwide resonance for future public discussions. "If you want to mobilise major names we ought to be able to say we started this with the number one personality of the UN. It's not a small little thing we're doing with this Geneva Lecture series, it's really important for the UN," he explained. When Ban he did not turn up in Geneva for several months after he took over from Kofi Annan last year, some staff and Swiss officials had feared that the South Korean was ready to demote the UN's second biggest headquarters. "He felt some of the media press coverage wasn't fair so this a good opportunity to correct misperceptions," said Lopes. However, the outreach could run deeper for Lopes, who studied in Geneva more than 25 years ago. He feels many internationals are detached from the local community, and too readily dismiss the place as boring. "I find it very annoying even that a lot of the international people living in Geneva have become stuck on the clichés about the city and don't explore it, explore an interaction," said the UNITAR chief. "Not only with the Swiss and Genevois, but even other foreigners that are living in the city who are not necessarily in the diplomatic environment," he added. "I find that I'm defending the possibilities that Geneva offers and how good it is to relate to a number of activities that the city has, that normally come as a total surprise to my interlocutors in international organisations because they are not even aware [of them]; they don't make the effort." Geneva's reputation was enough to spark an exchange in the letters page of the Financial Times two years ago -- a "rather boring and stuck-up place" according to one letter writer, who was nonetheless sympathetic.

Two international peacemakers are expected to face-off for the following round in the UNITAR lecture series in late summer.

Registration for the first Geneva Lectures has now closed after some 1,500 people sought entry, more than organisers expected. The event will be webcast live over the Internet.