

Interview with
former Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon
June 8, 2017
In New York
Interviewer: Jean Krasno

JK: Mr. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, when I was speaking with your special assistant Chang Wook-jin, he started to tell me stories about your “good offices.” To define that, the good offices are the ability of the Secretary-General to mediate a situation or to use the office of the Secretary-General to name an envoy or a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG). I saw your colleague Jessica at the UN on Monday or Tuesday and I told her that I was going to be meeting with you. She was there the day (in December 2016) when I did the interview. I told her I wanted to talk to you about Myanmar and the typhoon. And she that this was a very good topic. I did a little bit of research on it.

SG: It was a cyclone, Cyclone Nargis.

JK: In the US news, we called it a typhoon.

SG: In the Asia Pacific, we call it a typhoon; in South East Asia a cyclone, and in the Caribbean a hurricane. They are called different things.

JK: This one took place in May 2008. You had been Secretary-General for about a year and a half. There was a controversy because the government in Myanmar apparently did not want assistance. What was the issue? What was the controversy?

SG: As you know, since 1962, when the military overthrew the civilian government of U Nu in a coup, the military ran the government until a series of referenda took place in 2010 and 2012 to hold elections. I took over as Secretary-General in January 2007, and I had been trying to help Myanmar’s democratization process but they were very sensitive to United Nations involvement. And the United Nations mission, which we call UN country teams, their activities had been largely restricted. I had not been able to visit Myanmar as Secretary-General. Then in May 2008, this Cyclone Nargis hit the country. And unfortunately, I don’t remember the exact number of casualties, but a minimum of 120,000 people were killed in just two or three days. There was a big concern raised in the international community, especially the humanitarian community. They really wanted to rush to the scene to help the country. But the military regime led by General Than Shwe was pushing back. They were just closing their doors. The international community could not send any humanitarian assistance.

I really wanted to help them. They were extremely sensitive to the possible visit of a Secretary-General of the United Nations. The UN had been using a Special Envoy or Special Representative. I met the Myanmar ambassador in my office.

JK: Here in New York?

SG: Yes, I offered to him my proposal. I said, "I have a moral duty to help your country. But your country seems very much reluctant, so my proposal is that I will not say anything political. I will not mention anything political on the domestic political situation. I will be there just for humanitarian support and I will not request a meeting with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi." She was under house arrest and who was an idol of the Myanmar people and the international community for her stand on the democratization of Myanmar.

JK: She had the Nobel Peace Prize.

SG: Yes, the Nobel Peace Prize, but she was not able to receive it. She was prohibited from going there. So, the ambassador came back in just a few days and then he said, "Yes, okay, my government will receive your visit. So he approved my visit.

JK: This is perfect because you knew exactly what to say, I will not make a political statement.

SG: At that time a lot of the international media were interested; BBC, and other reporters traveled to Myanmar with me. And I met with General Thein Sein and had a long discussion. Before that I met with Than Shwe who was the president. General Thein Sein later became president. General Thein Sein was prime minister number four. He was most reasonable and understanding the whole situation. I first met him and his team and he was quite receptive. When I met General Than Shwe, he was just as hard as he could be. And it was very difficult to convince him. There was a long time of hesitation. And finally, he agreed to open up the door.

JK: What was he afraid of? I never understood that. People wanted to help. Why was he afraid of that?

SG: He seemed to be afraid that by opening his country to the international community, all these humanitarian and human rights people would just travel all around the world reporting and become critical. So, I just tried my best to alleviate his concerns that we were here only for humanitarian purposes and not meet with Aung San Suu Kyi. Let me help you. This is beyond your capacity and if you agree, I will convene in Yangon a donor's conference. That is what I proposed. I was very happy because as soon as I stepped out of his room, a lot of reporters were waiting. So, I said, for now we have opened the door. Even before I left to go to Myanmar, there were some Western leaders advising me not to go.

JK: Why would Western leaders not want you to go?

SG: If a Secretary-General of the United Nations would be there, this would amount to legitimizing a military regime. This would cut off an already poor country essentially with sanctions, trade sanctions, economic sanctions. They said you can send your special envoy; you can use your UN country team there to mobilize financial and humanitarian assistance. You can convene a conference, but not inside Myanmar by your going there. However, I was able to convince him [General Than Shwe]. Then I convened an international conference in Yangon. Many, many people came but I was not satisfied with the amount of money pledged because of the very short, limited time I had to organize this.

JK: You organized the donor conference right there in Yangon while you were still there?

SG: Yes, and at that time, Foreign Minister Kouchner of France was suggesting that the Responsibility to Protect be applied. He created a huge reaction, particularly by the Myanmar government. They were afraid that the United Nations would send a peacekeeping operation to forcibly do it.

JK: Under the Responsibility to Protect?

SG: That's right. After that, I went to Myanmar again for a second time. Even then, the Western leaders were very much against my going there. "We could understand that you were there for humanitarian support, but now, a second time, why are you going there?" This time, I wanted to really help them democratize.

JK: Because now you had made a contact?

SG: Yes, definitely.

JK: Now, when you held the donor conference, were there NGOs that were willing to come forward?

SG: There were NGOs, European countries. Most European countries sent delegations. The amount pledged was not impressive. I don't remember exactly, but about 70 or 80 million dollars. It was helpful. But I proceeded. At that time, the international community was very much against me, very critical, even the media, because I was not able to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi.

JK: That was all they were thinking about?

SG: I really wanted to meet her. The first time, I said I would not raise this political issue, but this time, I really wanted to discuss political issues.