

NEWSMAKER: KOFI ANNAN

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The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer Transcript

The spotlight has been on U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan ever since his last minute trip to Iraq resulted in a deal with Iraqi president Saddam Hussein that averted a military strike. He talks to Margaret Warner about his role in the crisis, details of the deal, and his hopes for the future of the United Nations.

MARGARET WARNER: Welcome, Mr. Annan.

KOFI ANNAN, U.N. Secretary-General: Thank you very much.

MARGARET WARNER: Thanks for being with us. What is the meaning to Iraq behind the resolution that the U.N. passed this week?

KOFI ANNAN: I think the meaning to Iraq is that if they do not comply next time round peace may not be given a second chance. And I hope that they will comply because the test will be in the application.

MARGARET WARNER: So does the severest consequences, which is the phrase used in the resolution, does that definitely mean military action?

Would the Security Council support the use of force if Iraq fails to comply?

KOFI ANNAN: I think it implies that the Council will take a very strict action, and that if there is further disruption of inspections, that there could be very serious consequences. And my sense is if that were to happen the mood in the Council may be quite different. And, let's not forget that the resolution was passed unanimously. So the unity of the Council is restored. And if they have to act again, my sense is that unity could be sustained.

MARGARET WARNER: Now, President Clinton said yesterday that he felt the resolution, the phrase he used was provides the authority to act, as he put it, if Iraq doesn't comply. Is that how you read it, that it provides the authority say for any single member state to act unilaterally?

KOFI ANNAN: This is a Council-led decision. I'm mean, the resolution yesterday was passed unanimously by the Council, and the Council decided that it will remain seized of the matter. And my sense then is that if Iraq does not comply and action is going to be

taken, the Council will somehow want to be seized of it. But I think it will be much easier then for the Council to move forward unanimously.

MARGARET WARNER: So you feel that say the French, the Chinese, the Russians, would be-- do intend to follow through--would be more open to the use of military force than they were before?

KOFI ANNAN: I think they--first of all, let me say that everybody this time round indicated they preferred a diplomatic solution. We have got that solution, and we are now going to test it. If Iraq fulfills it strictly and in accordance with the understanding we've reached in Baghdad, it may see light at the end of the day. If it does not and disrupts it, and the issue came up again, I don't think there will be many members in the Council hesitating to take action.

MARGARET WARNER: Now, what would constitute violation of the agreement, of the agreement you negotiated with the Iraqis, in your view?

Iraq must give full access to presidential palaces.

KOFI ANNAN: The agreement offers full and unrestricted access for the U.N. inspectors. And we are also being given access and entry into the presidential palaces. This can only be done with the cooperation of the Iraqis, and hopefully they will stick to this understanding. If they don't, and they block the inspectors from doing their work, it will constitute a violation.

MARGARET WARNER: Now, in your reading of the agreement, which, of course, you negotiated, is there any room for legitimate disagreement, as you see it, over an access question?

KOFI ANNAN: It's difficult to answer that question. I think we pretty much covered most of the issues, but, you know, you've asked a theoretical question, and I'm often hesitant about dealing with theoretical situations. In life, you never know. It could happen, yes.

MARGARET WARNER: I guess I was just asking because it also says unconditional access. And I just wondered if, in your view, that means basically the inspectors can go anywhere, anytime they want.

KOFI ANNAN: I think, you know, we all have to be reasonable, and I think the Iraqis and the U.N. officials in that even though we have unconditional access, almost everything we've done in Baghdad we've had to rely on the cooperation of the Iraqis. For example, the Iraqis participate; they travel with the inspectors; they go along with them; and in some cases inspections have been canceled because the Iraqi participants have not appeared. And so there could be some misunderstanding, but it is not beyond human ingenuity to find solutions to these. And I hope that even if the situation you've alluded to

were to occur, with the professionalism and goodwill on both sides, we can work them out.

The role of diplomats in the inspection process.

MARGARET WARNER: Now, turning to the presidential sites, which was the special category you particularly had to negotiate, what is going to be the role of these diplomats, who for the first time are going to accompany the UNSCOM inspectors?

KOFI ANNAN: There has been some confusion about that. The role of the diplomats will be to observe, and they'll be observing both ways, to ensure that the Iraqis carry out their commitments and do what they have promised to do--and also to ensure that the U.N. inspectors get on with their work with certain respect and sensitivity, given the fact that these are presidential sites, and for the government it is extremely important that it is handled with dignity and sensitivity. And so the diplomats will observe. They will have nothing to do with the actual inspections. The team leader will be an expert either from UNSCOM or the Atomic Agency. And the diplomats will be there to observe.

MARGARET WARNER: And will the diplomats have any independent authority or independent line to you?

KOFI ANNAN: They will have access to the commissioner, who is the head of the special group for the palaces. And he and Mr. Butler will be working very closely together. But it will be to the commissioner.

MARGARET WARNER: Not to beat this horse to death, but will you be getting your report from Mr. Butler, or will there be a separate report from the commissioner of the diplomats?

KOFI ANNAN: The report of the special group, which is headed by a commissioner, will be sent to the Security Council from Butler through me to the Council.

MARGARET WARNER: Now, you also said that the diplomats are there to ensure that the UNSCOM inspectors treat these sites with the dignity they should be treated. Are you suggesting that in the past UNSCOM inspectors have not done that?

KOFI ANNAN: Well, this is the first time in seven years that they've been given access to any of these palaces. And this is a direct outcome of the agreement we signed in Baghdad on the 23rd of February. Some of the other sites have been factories; they have been laboratories. They have been other sites which perhaps do not require the kind of sensitive treatment that the Iraqis are demanding here. And I know that I have been misquoted and misquoted wrongly time and time again, and, in some cases, I think deliberately, that I have called the inspectors cowboys. I did not call them cowboys. I reported what the Iraqi authorities told me, that some of them throw their weight around and behave like cowboys. And they don't want that sort of treatment around these--that sort of behavior around these palaces. I have been working with UNSCOM right from the

beginning, and I know the tremendous amount of work they have done, and I have respect for them. But I also have a duty to report to the Council what I picked up in Baghdad.

MARGARET WARNER: And this week, as I understand it, your representative with Mr. Butler and others have been negotiating these procedures. Has that been concluded? Is all this agreed to?

KOFI ANNAN: Yes, it's more or less done. We have the procedures, and we should be ready to begin the inspections of the palaces as soon as the team is gathered in Baghdad.

MARGARET WARNER: Now, President Clinton also said that U.S. forces will remain, that beefed-up U.S. forces will remain in the Gulf for the time being. Do you think that's necessary, or helpful, to ensure Iraqi compliance?

How long will U.S. troops be in the Gulf?

KOFI ANNAN: I think in the President's judgment that is necessary for them to remain there until we've had a chance to test the agreement. And, as I said, agreement is something on paper until one lives up to their commitments. And I hope in the next few months we will see serious performance on the Iraqi side, and when that happens, presumably the President will not see any need to keeping military on the ground.

MARGARET WARNER: How long do you think it would be appropriate--you talked about several months--for the U.S. to keep forces at that level in the region?

KOFI ANNAN: That judgment is not mine. The judgment of how long the troops stay is that and that of the President and the alliance alone. And so it is a decision they will have to take. The reference to a month or a couple of months is a guess--guesswork on my part. The decision is the President's and his alone.

MARGARET WARNER: Now, the resolution also says that once Iraq complies with Resolution 687, which was the resolution that ended the Gulf war, that sanctions could be lifted, but again there's some confusion over really what it is Iraq has to comply with. What has Iraq not done yet, very briefly, that it hasn't? Is it all dealing with weapons, or are there other issues?

KOFI ANNAN: I think you have the weapons issue, the question of disarmament, and we have two phases of that. You first disarm to establish a base line, and then you have ongoing monitoring, which can go on for quite some time. And then you have the question of missing in action, a Kuwaiti missing in action, and return of Kuwaiti properties. These are the things that Iraq has to comply with, and then the Council will lift the sanctions.

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott criticizes Mr. Annan's efforts.

MARGARET WARNER: Finally, as you know, your deal has been criticized by some Republicans in Congress, and you personally, Trent Lott, the Senate Majority Leader, said--he was describing your dealings with Saddam Hussein, and he said you were someone bent on appeasement and someone devoted to building a human relationship with a mass murderer. How do you answer critics like that?

KOFI ANNAN: Well, these are rather strong and harsh words. And I'm not even sure if I can comment because I don't know what is behind those statements, because I think what I did was to try to save lives, to try and get Iraq to comply in accordance with the Security Council resolutions. And I think if this effort, which was not an easy one, which entailed quite a lot of risks, to try and get Iraq to comply, to save lives, and to prevent explosion in the Middle East--is going to be described in those terms, then of course we have different objectives. I know that some people on the Hill have a different idea as to how Iraq and President Saddam Hussein should be handled. That is not my concern. I am guided by Security Council resolutions. Yesterday, on the Larry King Show I was asked: Some people say the President must be taken out. And I explained, quite candidly, that the U.N. is not in the business of taking out any president, this or that president out. In our organization that is illegal. And I have no mandate from the Council. And so for those who think that should be the objective, whatever you do short of that is failure, is appeasement, and is weakness. And so I don't think there is anything else I can say.

MARGARET WARNER: How do you think you can--or do you think you can regain the trust of these Republicans who are ones who are going to decide whether or not the U.S. pays back its U.N. dues? You were supposed to be down here this week to talk to them about that, and Sen. Lott sent word he was too busy to see you. How are you going to get around that?

KOFI ANNAN: Well, first of all, I had to postpone my visit to Washington, because I had to be in New York for the Security Council discussion of the agreement I brought back. It was legitimate that I remain here, and so, perhaps just as well he didn't have time to see me also, because I was going to go down in any event. But let me say that I have done my work as secretary-general, I'm accountable to the United Nations, to the Security Council, and to the 185 member states, including the U.S.. And I did what the Security Council and the United Nations wanted me to do. The U.S. is a member of this organization; the U.S. voted in the Security Council before I left, agreeing to what I was attempting to do. And since I came back, the entire Council has unanimously endorsed the agreement, and the U.S. voted for it. And so those who have a problem with the agreement should not quarrel with me. They should take it up with the member states of the U.N. There are 185 of them. If they have a quarrel, it's with them and not with me. From the day they approved the agreement in their program, I negotiated it.

MARGARET WARNER: All right. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Annan.