

12 March 2002

Interview with Charlie Rose

Secretary-General Kofi Annan on his U.N. Legacy

Charlie Rose: Kofi Annan has been the secretary general of the United Nations since 1997. He has held the U.N.'s most powerful position at a time of profound change both in the organization and in international relations. During his first term, he focused on revitalizing the United Nations. He also forced the U.N. member states to address ethnic conflicts such as those in Somalia, the Balkans and Rwanda, as well as the ongoing AIDS crisis.

Last June, he was reappointed secretary general. Since then, he has focused on two main challenges: peace in the Middle East and world poverty. In December, 2001, he and the United Nations were awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.

I am please to have him here on this broadcast. Thank you for coming.

Kofi Annan, Secretary General, United Nations: Thank you very much, Charlie.

Charlie Rose: We want to talk about poverty in the world, an issue that you have addressed repeatedly during your tenures at the secretary generalship. But first, there are these two pressing issues. Number one is the Middle East. You're going to speak to the council, the Security Council. Tell me what – how you see this?

Kofi Annan: I think it's a really tragic situation, when you look at the number of people who have died, who have been wounded. And the death toll mounts every day. I think it is important that we get the two parties to step back from the brink and ask themselves the questions as to where they think they are heading. I believe Prime Minister Sharon and Chairman Arafat have an urgent responsibility to lead in this process.

The international community is ready to help, and I've been working with the U.S., the European Union and the Russian Federation. We call ourselves a quartet, constantly in touch, talking to each other, trying to figure out how we can help the parties. Both of them accepted the Mitchell plan and the Tenet understandings. And yet nothing has moved.

Recently, both Prime Minister Sharon and Chairman Arafat have said they want to talk. I think the sooner they get to the table and begin talking, the better.

Charlie Rose: What response are you getting from Chairman Arafat and from Prime Minister Sharon when you make the initiatives that you make?

Kofi Annan: I think Chairman Arafat has been under tremendous pressure by the international community to stem the attacks on innocent civilians and try and stop the terrorists from hitting Israeli civilians.

At the same time, even the closest friends and the best friends of Israel have also been appalled by the Israeli response, sending heavy weapons into civilian, highly populated areas. And on both sides, civilians and innocent people have been hurt and have been killed.

I hope with the arrival of Zinni – and of course, the vice president is also going to the region – and the efforts being made by others, including the statement by Crown Prince Abdullah, indicating that the Arab nations would be prepared to recognize the security and existence of Israel and accept a peace agreement – I think that is an important development, and most Arab states have rallied behind that.

And I think if we can get the two leaders to come to ceasefire arrangements and get to the table, the international community is ready to work with them. But I think they have to assume their responsibilities.

Charlie Rose: You mentioned the Israelis. Is there a moral equivalency or not, in terms of the amount of violence in both places, whether it's suicide bombers, attacks or settlements, or whether it's Israelis going into occupied territories and inflicting the damage?

Kofi Annan: I think the issue is – we've gone beyond the issue of this equivalency or not, in terms of a moral equivalent or criminal equivalence or whatever. What it is, is that both sides use the actions or perceived actions of the other side as an excuse to escalate. When you talk to either side, they see it as revenge, retaliation, counterattack.

We have to find a way getting out of this downward spiral of violence and really get them back to the table. I think we've reached a – we've gone beyond the point of pointing fingers. They need to lead, and we have to help them act.

Charlie Rose: There is a sense of desperation.

Kofi Annan: Everyone is desperate, and there are lots of ideas being thrown out. Everyone is frustrated because everything we've tried doesn't seem to work. I've instructed my representative on the ground, Terje Larsen, to work with the Americans, the Russian Federation and the European representatives on the ground to assist the parties to try and get them back to the table.

We have lots of staff, U.N. workers, on the ground who have also gone through a very difficult – and they've been very courageous. We've lost people who were taking the wounded to hospital in ambulance when the ambulance were shot at.

It's a very, very dangerous situation, and we cannot allow it to continue like this.

Charlie Rose: Let me just finally move to Iraq. Representatives of that government were here. Now we have the announcement that they will not allow inspectors. What does that mean? Because as we hear that news from Baghdad, we also know – we also know that the vice president is meeting with Prime Minister Blair, clearly outlining alternatives that the United States feels are imperative for doing something about a country that is apparently developing weapons of mass destruction.

Kofi Annan: Let me say that I heard the – I read the statement by the Iraqi vice president, but again, last week, the minister of foreign affairs of Iraq was here talking to me about possible return of U.N. inspectors.

And I think - and they also came with the head of their own disarmament – I mean, armament team, a General Amin, who sat at the table with Hans Blix, the chief U.N. inspector. And we went through those things. And we have agreed to meet again in mid-April.

And I'm going to pursue this and press them to allow the inspectors in, and the council is fully behind this effort, that we press the Iraqis to allow the inspectors to go in.

As to the question of the vice president's discussions in London, I have also heard that these discussions are going on, but from where I sit, as secretary general of the U.N., I'm guided by the council resolutions. And the council resolutions are clear that Iraq must be disarmed and Iraq should allow the U.N. inspectors to come in. Failure to do that forces the council to maintain the sanctions which are imposed on Iraq. And of course, they've been under sanctions for 11 years.

What happens if we fail to get the inspectors in? What action and advice the council will take I don't know, but I will wait for that.

Charlie Rose: Clearly, the United States is considering unilateral action, if all else fails. I know of no country – and I've had lots of foreign ministers and heads of state in conversation here, most recently President Mubarak, and others – who would support the United States or advise the United States to do it.

But does the United States have an alternative if Iraq says no to inspections?

Kofi Annan: If it – if Iraq says no to inspections, I would hope that the Security Council that issued the initial demand for Iraq to disarm would also come into play, that the council would also have something to say about this. I think it would be in everyone's interest that if any action taken against Iraq is seen as something – an action endorsed by the Security Council and an action that has the support of the international community.

Charlie Rose: If the United States goes alone, do you think it will hurt its reputation in the Middle East and in that region?

Kofi Annan: I think, from my contacts and discussions with leaders in the region, I think they are concerned. They are worried about the implications of an American action against Iraq. They are worried about the aftermath. They are worried about possible social, economic and humanitarian upheavals after – after the military action.

And I think from what I gather and hope, Washington itself is thinking through this very, very carefully because from a military point of view, it's easy. It can be done. They have demonstrated they have the capacity. But that is, I think, not the most pressing issue. What happens after that? And how do we –

Charlie Rose: Yeah. And to point out, the United States has said that there is no – there has – no decision has been taken to take a unilateral action and that they are hoping that it can be solved in some other way. The danger of certain nations acquiring nuclear weapons is a real danger for the region, obviously.

Let me turn to poverty. You have been more eloquent about that issue, in my judgement, than any other issue facing the world. Give me a sense, speaking from your own heart and from your own observations and from your own experience, of where you put it, both in terms of its – its severity and also the absence of action on the part of those with resources to do something.

Kofi Annan: Yeah. I don't think we can undermine the extent of poverty in the world today. And in the year 2000, when the heads of states and government, 150 of them – presidents, prime ministers, kings – came to New York to discuss the millennium declaration, they put poverty at the top of our priorities.

Poverty is one of the key issues they want us to [unintelligible] There are over two billion people today who live with less than \$1 a day.

Charlie Rose: Two billion –

Kofi Annan: Billion.

Charlie Rose: - people on the planet live with less than \$1 a day.

Kofi Annan: Than \$1 a day. And we see situations where woman, for example, are walking further and further to go and look for water, further and further to go and look for firewood. They cannot stop because they are in pain because they are worried about their child. We have situations in Africa and elsewhere today where the AIDS epidemic is ravaging society –

Charlie Rose: A generation.

Kofi Annan: A generation. And in some situations, the productive people are the ones being taken away. You go to villages, there are children and grandparents. No parents. They are gone. They could be helped. Medications are available. They can't afford it.

And of course, as this happens, it becomes both a security and developmental problem. The productive people are not there to press ahead with development. And as the world watches, the disease spreads faster. And you cannot isolate from poverty.

And I think, given what we've seen in Afghanistan, which is a failed state which we all ignored – the U.N. was there, was in Afghanistan for over two decades, doing humanitarian work and recently trying to work with the neighboring countries to find a political solution to their conflict.

But for a decade or more, it was ignored, and we see the results: a failed state which is then turned into a terrorist haven which prepares attacks. And we saw the results of it. And this is why I believe that we cannot allow Afghanistan to slip back.

But Afghanistan is one. We have many other states which are in the same desperate situation. And this is why when we go to Monterey in Mexico next month to discuss financing for development –

Charlie Rose: This is March 22nd?

Kofi Annan: March 22nd.

Charlie Rose: Yeah.

Kofi Annan: I really hope that the developed countries and the countries that are fortunate and have capacity to give will seize this opportunity and send a powerful message to the poor that this is no longer business as usual. We see the gravity of the situation, and we want to work with you to address it.

I hope they will – we can walk away with an understanding that overseas development assistance will be increased. I hope we can come up with strategies for increasing investments, foreign direct investments to these countries. I hope we will be able to let the poor – get the poor countries to understand that when it comes to decisions affecting the management of global economy, their voices will be heard.

I hope we can walk away with an understanding that the developing countries themselves will strengthen their own institutions and we are – we will fight corruption, including returning the millions and if not billions of dollars that some corrupt third world leaders have salted away in banks around the world.

Charlie Rose: How do you create urgency? How do you create priority if most people, informed people, understand what it's doing, not only in terms of individuals, no only in terms of health –

Kofi Annan: Yeah.

Charlie Rose: - but also in terms of making, as you said, in Afghanistan – and everybody knows this –

Kofi Annan: Yeah.

Charlie Rose: - young people vulnerable to the ideas of those who simply want to exploit them and lead them into a terrorist life?

Kofi Annan: I think it's – it's a very good question you posed because there has been a tendency for people to link poverty to terrorism. Let me say that the poor are not necessarily terrorists, but their situation is often exploited by those who would use terrorism as one of the reasons for their –

Charlie Rose: - By blaming their poverty –

Kofi Annan: That's correct.

Charlie Rose: - you know, and making their – their poverty or their life – and using it –

Kofi Annan: Exactly. The poor have enough problems not to be tarnished with this image of terrorism. But they exploit it. And they have leaders, political leaders, who exploit it to do this.

But I think we need to have, one, education. We need to really make sure that we get the right message out. You talked about – we need to – when I talk of education, I'm talking of education dealing with tolerance, understanding and respect for diversity. But we also have to address the causes of poverty. And here I don't think governments can do it alone. And this is why we are reaching out, working in partnerships with governments, with the private sector –

Charlie Rose: With foundations –

Kofi Annan: - foundations –

Charlie Rose: - like the Gates Foundation.

Kofi Annan: - the Gates Foundation and civil society at large.

And we also need to get the public to understand that problems in other regions are not necessarily divorced from our own concerns. And sometimes it can come back to haunt us.

Nine months, six months ago, who know about Afghanistan? Who cared? And yet we paid a price for ignoring the situation in Afghanistan. And the world has become so interdependent that we cannot simply say "I'm OK, Jack. And I don't care what is happening in other regions."

And it is in our self-interest to assist the poor countries and the people in the poor countries to make a decent life in their own countries. There's lots of tensions in society now. People are worried about mass movement of people, people knocking on the doors, crossing borders in search of economic survival. If we do not help them make a living at home and spread the prosperity that we see in other parts of the world, the movement will continue. We cannot stop it.

Charlie Rose: What do you say to a businessman who is – is slowly coming aware, a multinational corporate leader, you know, who's developing a little consciousness – what do you say to him or her as to why this issue is so directly tied to your self-interested not just as a citizen but as a businessman because the development of underdeveloped countries lead to new markets.

Kofi Annan: New markets.

Charlie Rose: It leads to opportunities for manufacturing and service industries.

Kofi Annan: - and the countries were to implode or there were to be major crises in regions where they operate, or to be major crises in regions that produces essential raw materials that they need. It affects the operations.

And the other thing I tell them, you cannot ignore the welfare of the societies in which you are making your fortune. And because we are so interlinked you ignore some of these problems to your own peril. And in quite a lot of these situations, business leaders have a role. They are often respected members in the society. They can influence policy. They can discuss issues with government. And they can meet.

I propose the business community that they join what I call the Global Compact, respecting nine key principles which have been universally accepted in the area of human rights, core labor standards and the environment. And it has been quite remarkable the response we've got from companies asking them to accept social – certain social responsibility for their corporations. I'm disappointed that many American companies have signed up, but lots of European companies, not an American nation companies have signed, realizing that they have the responsibility in this area as well.

Charlie Rose: Why do you think American companies haven't signed up?

Kofi Annan: It's been interesting. We've trying to figure out why, and I think they probably want to see how it evolves, although it's not a code of conduct, as such. We are seeking to change norms of these corporations and get them to factor this into their day-to-day operations and make a difference.

We are in discussions with some of the big companies. I hope in time they would. But big Europeans – the British Petroleum, Deutsche Bank – all of them are on board. And so we will hopefully see that the Americans will come and join us.

What I keep telling these companies is it's in their own interest. And what is remarkable is when they do these – embrace these principles, they start getting the idea, excited that there are companies doing the right. And they also gain respect in the communities and the societies in which they operate. A company does not have to wait for a government to pass a law before they know that your manufacturing – your factories should not pollute the water that provides – that the people drink; that you do not have to have a government pass a law to pay a decent wage.

There are lots of things companies can do and need to do. And I have made it clear that unless globalization is made to work for all it may not work for any of us in the longer term.

Charlie Rose: And poverty, is there differences of how to approach the issue?

Kofi Annan: I think a remarkable thing again happened at the Millennium Summit where these heads of state met. In fact, let me step back a bit.

When I took over and started the reform in '97, I thought, look, the U.N. is over 50 years old. In 50 years, one picks up a bit of excess by age and we need to reassess what we are doing and what we should be doing and that it would be good if we could have a Millennium Summit for the heads of state to tell us what the priorities should be. And they did give us priorities, including education for all, particularly girls, fighting poverty, HIV-AIDS, protecting the planet for future generations. We had a very clear agenda.

And that document, that Millennium declaration, was embraced by all the governments and it is now guiding the work of all the U.N. agencies, including [unintelligible] institutions, the World Bank and IMF. So we have a common framework, and understanding of what needs to be done.

We are also pressing each government to come up with a property allocation strategy where some of the U.N. and World Bank experts are helping them prepare it. And the international community will work with these governments to implement these strategies. And this is one of the reasons why when we go to Monterey we are looking to mobilize additional resources to be able to assist.

Charlie Rose: OK.

Kofi Annan: The donor countries have agreed unilaterally that they will spend 0.7 percent of their GDP on development assistance. Today that level is at 0.2 percent. Some of us –

Charlie Rose: Let me, before you go to – developing countries is a broad spectrum. Just take the G7 countries – they don't meet that standard. They're below .7 or the 0.7 domestic product.

Kofi Annan: In fact the ones who have met it are countries like Norway, the Scandinavians and Netherlands are doing very well. And we are – we hope that they will at least double what they are doing now.

Charlie Rose: Where is the United States?

Kofi Annan: The United States is towards the bottom.

Charlie Rose: Of developing countries?

Kofi Annan: Of assistance to developing countries, in terms of GDP.

Charlie Rose: The developing countries in assistance to – you know – industrial countries in assistance to developing countries.

Kofi Annan: Exactly. They say in terms of the 0.7, U.S. is nowhere near it.

Charlie Rose: You are generally an optimistic man. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the issue?

In the context of looking at what's happened to something like AIDS and the way it's sweeping through Africa and the subcontinent, can you be optimistic or not?

Kofi Annan: Let's say I have to be hopeful. I have to have hope to push and press ahead.

Charlie Rose: Because not to have hope would be unacceptable to you? Or because you have reason to hope?

Kofi Annan: That's a good question. I think have reason to hope in the sense that I believe we can get people to understand the issue and if we can mobilize the public and the leadership, we can do something.

To put it simply, I think the means to act is there. We have the resources. We have the technology.

Charlie Rose: No question about that.

Kofi Annan: It's the will. It's a political will. And so we have to find a way of generating the political will to do it. And it is that which gives me hope. And now that we are getting the public - we are raising public awareness, getting leaders to understand this and do something about it, it may take time but I still have hope that we can eventually do something about it because the means and the resources are there. We have to generate the will and that's what gives me hope.

Charlie Rose: When you think about it, is there a role – is there an example that you can hold out that said, look, here is what one person, one company, one NGO, one something did and here is the impact it had? On a one-to-one, from one place to one village.

Kofi Annan: Let me start national and then go down to individual. We know what the Marshall Plan did for Europe.

Charlie Rose: It rebuilt Europe.

Kofi Annan: It rebuilt Europe. And now when we talk about poverty, lots of people raise a question, a possibility of doing similar – making a similar effort to lift the poor out of their misery and to help them. That is an example that is coming up more and more.

You take the case of individuals like Bill Gates or Ted Turner, who have given quite a bit of their personal fortune to help those in need. On the question of environment and children and some of the issues that the U.N. is dealing with, without the contribution from these two men we wouldn't have been able to expand our capacity and assist as much as we have.

On the issue of health, we have GAVI, which is the Global Alliance on Vaccination, where Bill Gates put in – has put in \$750 million for us to ensure that children around the world are vaccinated. We also encourage research in vaccine.

Charlie Rose: Let me interrupt you. I want to move it.

Kofi Annan: And we have the situation, for example, a company like Volkswagen in Brazil came up with an incredible program to help its workers and the community suffering from HIV-AIDS and has helped quite a lot of people to turn the situation around.

Charlie Rose: It is Bill Gates, in conversations with me and others, it is his most pressing, certainly, medicine, immunizations and other issues that come in there. They're all together. He is committed to it because he believes, as smart as he is, that you can make the difference. And he understands how a little in a larger context can go so far.

Kofi Annan: Absolutely.

Charlie Rose: And how more could go exponentially further. But it is a perfect example of someone who lives in affluence and the second or the first richest man in the world, understands how the resources can make a difference.

Kofi Annan: That's correct. I personally have lots of admiration for men like that, like Bill Gates, Ted Turner and all these generous individuals because I often say that is like a farmer. The farmer knows that if you take something from the earth today, you have to put something back to be able to return the next day and harvest.

But somehow when we move into the cities we seem to forget this natural order of things. But these men who have done well and feel that you have to help on this, you have to help the world turn around and keep things going are the ones that we should emulate and encourage.

Charlie Rose: What do you want your legacy to be?

Kofi Annan: I would hope that when the time comes for me to move on and I've gone, one would be able to say that I helped the U.N. function better, a little better, one would be able to say that we managed to put the individual at the center of everything that we do, and governments, people at large to think a bit more about the individual dignity and the sanctity of life.

Charlie Rose: And if you are suffering and if you are ill and if you do not have food and if you are living on a dollar a day, those are all assaults on the dignity of an individual life.

Kofi Annan: Exactly.

Charlie Rose: Secretary-General, thank you very much for coming here. It's a pleasure to see you.

Kofi Annan: Thank you. It's good to see you.

Charlie Rose: We'll be back. Stay with us.