

5

**Transcript of interview with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan by APTN,  
12 August 1999. (Journalist: Philip Roberts)**

**Question:**

What is the significance of this anniversary in terms of re-consciencizing people about the substance of the Geneva conventions?

**The Secretary-General:**

*Geneva Conv*

The Geneva conventions are very important. As I said this morning, in a way, the Charter of the UN captures our collective experience coming out of the World War II - to try and ensure that we build a world that will not see another world war. And in a way, what is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights also captures our ideals and the world, and the way we would want to see the world, and how we treat each other. But the Geneva conventions become more specific and direct us as to how we should treat civilians in situations of war, the wounded, and how we should do it. The record has not been very good. And today, it is the civilians that suffer most in these wars. There was a time when for every casualty it was ten soldiers to one civilian. Now, its overwhelmingly civilian.

*UN Charter  
Universal Decl  
of  
HR*

*Civilians - conflict*

And in fact, we've got into situations where the dead of today's wars are literally not counted. Armies tend to boast about the numbers of the other enemies they have killed. You know, count their own, but they don't give you the figures or they underestimate it. The civilians, nobody counts them. It's only now with (Rwanda) with (Bosnia) with (Kosovo), that one is making a systematic effort, not only to count them, but to make sure that the culprits and the violators are brought to justice and that impunity is not allowed to stand. So I think that what happened here today, the 50th anniversary of the Geneva conventions, is an important reminder that they are even more relevant today than ever, given what is happening in these civil wars and in the theatre. You know, when the conventions were written, the whole idea was to protect civilians in armed conflict. But today, given the fact that they are the targets... ethnic cleansing, rape of women, systematic killing... its the objective of warfare that we need to protect them from. Warfare itself, not just in war situations. So I think the Geneva conventions are extremely relevant and a very powerful message. I, myself, only today issued instructions enshrining the Geneva conventions in guidelines for UN peacekeepers How they should approach them, how they should honour them and respect them. And I hope that the guidelines are not going to be only for UN peacekeepers but that all the governments and all the armies will adopt them and use them as a training tool in their military academies.

*Civilians deaths*

*Protection of  
civilians  
in armed  
conflict*

*50th  
Anniversary of  
Geneva Conventions  
UN Peacekeepers*

NATO - humanitarian  
in  
strategic bombing

**Question:**

This just about says it all, but I wanted to ask you in relation to the recent Balkans conflict. For example, some people have said that maybe even NATO- in this concept of strategic bombing and so on - could be said to be in contravention of the spirit of international humanitarian law in some respect. It's very difficult to choose your target. What is your view on that?

**The Secretary-General:**

I think I know that this is an issue that obviously the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia will be looking into because it did indicate.. and I think that Mrs Robinson following discussions with Mrs. Abour, the Prosecutor, made a very strong statement at the time of the war that the conduct of all those engaged in the war would be scrutinized and looked at. And if crimes have been found to be committed, those concerned will be prosecuted.

Abour

I think the Geneva Conventions make it quite clear that one should be careful not to engage in military activities that could harm civilians. Not to destroy essential facilities that are necessary for civilian life during or after the war. And so this is an issue that the Tribunal will be looking into, so I prefer not to get too much involved. But I think the law has to apply, fairly consistently across the board regardless of who commits a crime.

**Question:**

Certainly now, as an African myself, and you assumed earlier to ask... Do you think that there may have been a tenancy in the past - I mean the great genocides of Rwanda and so on and violations in places like Liberia and Sierra Leone. Do you think that there has been a tenancy to sweep that under the carpet because, from the perception of the west, Africa somehow is less important?

**The Secretary-General:**

press and television

I don't think it can be swept under the carpet given the work you do. The work of the press and in today's world where things are immediately put on television, and we all know what is happening. What is unforgivable is inaction in one case and action in the other and obviously if we do have standards, and I think we are moving towards a world, where in my judgement, international law in particular, is moving in the direction where the protection of the individual is becoming crucial and we are moving in the direction where people are beginning to understand that the emphasis that we've placed on sovereignty and state security is something that may have perhaps been exaggerated and that we should shift that emphasis to the protection of the individuals within the State. Because after all, that is the responsibility of governments and leaders to protect the population and given our own beliefs and the acceptance of the basic

inaction

Sovereignty and state security exaggerated

emphasis on protection of individual  
responsibility to protect

Shift from  
state security to  
protection of  
individuals

principles of human rights and the individual dignity and respect for individual life, I think that the idea of protecting individuals within the State is important. How we make the shift, and shift the emphasis from state security and state .. to protection of individuals within it, is something that is going to be a real test for all of us as we move into the next century. And as you can tell we did it in South Africa. The international community took its time by imposing an embargo and sanctions. We know what is going on in the British and the Spanish courts. We've seen what happened in Kosovo. We also saw what happened in Somalia where for compelling humanitarian reasons, the international community intervened to avoid a famine and helped the people in Somalia. Now we have to try and come up with a system that will allow us to protect individuals and do it even if we are not able to intervene everywhere. At least, and I'm not using intervention only in terms of military action, intervention can take many forms, and the best intervention is getting in early to prevent the bloodshed so you don't have to go in with an army later. And this is something that all of us have to devise means of doing.

intervention

**Question:**

In your opinion, does the attempt to regulate war, legitimize war and at the same time would it be conceivable to imagine a conflict without violations.? So basically, does the attempt to regulate war, somehow legitimize war?

regulation of war

**The Secretary-General:**

No, it doesn't legitimize war. I think an attempt to come up with rules, rules protecting civilians is a recognition that we can not perhaps avoid war. I wish there would be no wars. Man has been killing man for over 2000 years and we are still at it. And if we can not stop it, and until we stop it, we have to come up with some guidelines and rules, that would at least protect non-combatants, people who are innocent. In the sense that bystanders should not be really caught between men and women in uniform who are trained and hopefully have been given some rules of warfare. And there have to be some minimum standards, because as I said that even in the past, during the World War II, although there were lots of atrocities - we have the holocaust and we have others. But by and large, in previous wars going back to World War I and others, civilians suffered a lot and one came up and said if they are not party to the conflict, if they are not in uniform and two armies are fighting, treat them well. And even the wounded, they must have access to treatment, and there are certain things you simply don't do. And today we've seen incredible atrocities committed against unarmed civilians. In these civil wars, one is fighting almost peasant warfare with very sophisticated equipment directed at civilians. So I think we need to make an attempt to protect them, until we find some way of stopping wars. And by coming up with rules for protection and treatment of civilians, does not mean one is legitimizing war. Nobody wants war. In war, all are losers. But until you find a way of stopping it, I think you need to do something to protect those you can. Thank you very much

END

Excerpt