

BBC - Q & A following Lecture delivered by
SG Kofi Annan on 10 Dec. 2002
(this transcript was prepared by BBC)

Robin Lustig:

Let's take our first question from our audience here in the hall of the United Nations headquarters in New York. Our first question is from William Harton from the New York-based think tank, The World Policy Institute.

William Harton:

I had a question about the inspections process and particularly the handling of the declaration by Iraq. As of Friday afternoon, this appeared that the process was going to be that the UN inspection team would look at it first and then it would be shared with the Council members. Over the weekend that was abruptly shifted under pressure from one member state to a situation where the United States had first access and doled it out only to the permanent members. Is this part of a larger problem in terms of the timing and protocol involving this process? I know that the head of the IAEA has said it could take up to a year to ensure that Iraq has no remnants of a nuclear weapons programme. So how does that timeline for inspections fit with this, what appears to be, attempt to rush the process?

Kofi Annan:

I just came from a lunch this afternoon - I had my monthly lunch with all the Security Council members, including the five new members who will be joining next year and we discussed this issue. Obviously some members were a bit unhappy about the development but we came up with a very clear understanding and the Council unanimously supports the approach which has been adopted.

What has been agreed is that the five permanent members would also look at the document and give their input to the chief inspectors - that is Dr. el-Baradei and Dr Blix. And here we are looking at material that should be excised from the document - material that should not get into the public domain - and the inspectors will look at all the input, make a judgment and remove those paragraphs and share the text - the entire document - with the other members of the Council.

Of course down the line, when the critical decisions are being taken, it is to be expected that other members of the Council would want to know which parts of the report were removed and its implication for future decisions of the Council would want to take.

We walked away from the lunch, with the members expressing full confidence in Dr Blix and full confidence in the inspectors. So I do not expect this development over the weekend to affect the cohesiveness of the Council and their determination to work together.

I have stated time and time again that the Council voted unanimously to send in the inspectors and gave them their mandate and they have a duty and an obligation to support them as long as they continue their professional work and that we shouldn't do anything to undermine them. I was relieved at the end of this lunch - I walked away with a full sense that the Council as a whole, is solidly behind Blix in his work.

Some time next week, Mr Blix will brief the Council - it's tentatively scheduled for Monday - where he will give them the document as it has been cleaned up.

Robin Lustig:

But the problem, Secretary-General, surely is that what happened to this declaration feeds into a perception which many people have which is that the US somehow always gets its own way in the UN.

I want to read you three e-mails of the many which have come in making that kind of point. The first one is from a World Service listener in Canada: Mahan Kulasegaram, who says: How can Mr Annan allow the domination of an organisation such as the UN, designed to ensure peace and security as well as to promote goodwill, to be pushed and cajoled into war by the US? Why is it that the UN has become a puppet for a warmongering ignoramus?

This one is from a listener in New Zealand, John Mawdsley: I think many people see the United States as undermining or supplanting the role of the UN as the global peacekeeper given its history of aggressive foreign intervention in other countries. How do you see the UN maintaining a credible role in the light of the United States' sabre-rattling?

Another one from Nigeria, Segun Adeoye: Don't you see the UN as merely a puppet of the US?

All of these questions and their suspicions, I suspect, fuelled by what happened with this declaration - we were told nobody on the Security Council was going to see it and then suddenly the US have got it.

Kofi Annan:

You certainly have very outspoken listeners. Let me say that at lunch today this issue was discussed. I think the consensus of the group was that in substance, perhaps a decision was fine but the approach and the style and the form was wrong. Because the Council had decided last Friday that nobody would get it and some would have preferred that the Council got into another meeting to discuss it before this decision was taken.

But in substance, given the size of the declaration, there was a sense that since these five countries have experts in the nuclear and other areas, they could help the inspectors sift through what needs to be taken up and give their judgments to the inspectors. But the final decision will be up to the inspectors.

Robin Lustig:

But do you agree that the way in which the decision was taken - the way in which it emerged that this declaration was to be distributed only among the five permanent members of the Security Council, was, to say the least, unfortunate?

Kofi Annan:

It was unfortunate and I hope it is not going to be repeated. I should also say that for those who maintain that the UN is being pushed around by the United States, I will remind them to look back to the eight week period when we were discussing this issue, when Washington was quite frustrated that things were not moving fast enough and that member states were prevented from doing what it wanted. It is a process of democracy. The Council had grave decisions to take and they took their time, deliberated and I think in the end, given the circumstances, came up with an optimal decision. If the US could have pushed them around, we wouldn't have had that eight week debate.

Robin Lustig:

So your answer to our listener in Nigeria - don't you see the UN as merely a puppet of the US - your answer is, no I don't?

Kofi Annan:

My answer is that it's not that simplistic. The US does have influence but there are other members of the Council. We tend to think that the permanent five and those with veto powers

- quite frankly veto is negative power. You can use veto to block a decision but you cannot use a veto to take a decision. You need nine votes and you need the other elected members - at least some of them - to be able to take a decision and I think the US and the other members are very conscious of that.

The Middle East

Robin Lustig:

This was a question which was e-mailed to us from a listener in Britain, G. Hussein who says: I am a moderate Muslim, yet the more I see of the UN's double standards against Muslims in the Middle East, the more I see myself being edged towards extremism. Why is it that the UN insists that Iraq complies with UN resolutions, whilst Israel is allowed to flout other resolutions? What do I do? Do I believe in diplomacy?

Kofi Annan:

First of all I would advise not to move towards extremism and I would also say that the use of violence whatever your cause, resorting to terrorism, whatever your cause is not justified. In fact it detracts from your cause and in the long run you will lose sympathy from around the world.

On the question of double standards, it's a difficult question and it's a question that has been around for a long time. I have not had a press conference or spoken to a leader in the Middle East where this issue has not come up. But we have two separate situations in the sense, and it is difficult to explain. We have a Chapter 7 resolution on Iraq which is mandatory with the member states that are determined to implement. Iraq went to war with the rest of the world a decade ago and it is part of the process of the UN trying to disarm Iraq and the Council is following through on these resolutions.

The resolutions regarding Israel are not under Chapter 7 and are not in the same way enforceable by the international community. This does not mean that the resolutions should be ignored. I think the UN has made it clear that the only basis for us to move forward and resolve the conflict between Israel and Palestine is through land for peace. That Israel should give up the land for peace and in the end we would want to see two states - Israel and Palestine - living side-by-side in security. This is why the quartet, made up of the US, United Nations, the Russian Federation and the European Union, are working hard to develop a roadmap that will move us towards this settlement in three years time.

Robin Lustig:

Let me call another question from here in the hall. Asma Yusef from the Washington Report on Middle Eastern Affairs.

Asma Yusef:

There are many grievances being expressed by people of the Muslim and the Arab world - we just heard one earlier. But chief among them is what is being perceived as lack of representation of Muslim interests and Arab interests in the United Nations, whether in terms of policies being enacted or in terms of presence in key UN bodies, such as the United Security Council. How do you respond to these grievances?

Kofi Annan:

Let me start by saying that first of all the United Nations is an organisation of states. If you wish, what you have in the UN is block politics. You have various groups - the Asian group, the African group, the European group, the Middle Eastern group and they often work together

and lobby for their positions. When it comes to policy, a decision by the General Assembly, for example, where each member state has a vote, it is up to individual member states or the regional group to lobby and work with the others to get their views reflected in the decisions which are taken. In that sense, the Arab and the Islamic group have the same opportunities of trying to influence others, trying to influence policy, trying to influence decisions, the way other groups have and I would urge every member state and every group to take advantage of that possibility and put across their position and influence resolutions and policy.

On your question about the Security Council, it is a bit more complex and I know the issue has been raised before. That today, of the fifteen members, we have one Islamic member - Syria - and as we talk about Security Council reforms, the question has been raised as to whether one should ensure that apart from regional balance, there is a cultural balance of the kind you have implied.

There is a sense that the Security Council as it is currently constituted, reflects the geopolitical realities of 1945 and that it should be reformed to make it more democratic and more representative. The debate has gone on for many years but the member states who should take the decision haven't come to any conclusion yet and I hope this will be done because quite frankly, until the Security Council is reformed, for many people outside this building, the reform of this organisation would not be complete.

Africa

Robin Lustig:

We've had a lot of e-mails from BBC World Service listeners in Africa and I'd like to move on to Africa now. This comes from Ethiopia from Konjit who writes: Coming from a country badly betrayed by the UN's predecessor, I question how far the UN is willing to go for African peace and development. The massacre in Rwanda and ongoing conflicts in Somalia, Congo etc. remain a problem. I have lost the enthusiasm I had in high school when we celebrated UN Day. How far can the UN go against governments to establish continuous harmony in such regions? It seems like action is taken only when a regime is a threat to certain governments.

Kofi Annan:

Let me say that Konjit, I can understand your pain and frustration. But as an African, let me say that we ought to be careful not to put the blame always elsewhere. We have a responsibility. We, the Africans, are now leaders and I have often had to ask what is it in our society that recently leads us to turn on each other. That pushes us to pick up arms to settle our differences and yet we are a continent that is very familiar with dialogue - the famous African palaver. If there is a problem, we get together and talk and talk and talk and if we cannot find a solution, we come again under the tree the next day and continue talking.

An Africa that produced a Mandela indicating that we do have an incredible capacity for forgiveness and reconciliation and yet today we have leaders and ambitious men, who do not seem to care what happens to the population. When we get into these conflicts it is the women and children who suffer. Why can't we organise ourselves in such a way that we avoid these conflicts rather than sitting back and saying what is the rest of the world doing for us.

The UN has a responsibility, we are going to try and work with the Africans and the leaders and with people in conflict elsewhere in the world to try and resolve them. But we have to accept that the inspiration for viable peace has to spring from the leaders and the people in the region. You must challenge your leaders also to work with us.

Robin Lustig:

So what you say then to listeners in Africa is that the solution to the continent's problems lies in the continent itself and not elsewhere?

Kofi Annan:

Absolutely. In fact I have indicated I am encouraged that they are beginning to take charge of their own destiny. They are beginning to come together to resolve their conflicts. Yes, the outside world can help but the basic responsibility is ours and I think more and more African leaders and Africans are beginning to understand that.

Robin Lustig:

But you see this listener, Joseph Onyango, in Kenya sent us an e-mail: In light of the businessmen and the dishonest politicians who exploit war-torn mineral rich countries in Africa, what would you say are the first three priorities in regard to tackling poverty and creating political stability in African states?

The problem is that African people are not often well represented by their leaders.

Kofi Annan:

You have some good leaders but we also have some very awkward and difficult leaders and we are suffering from the accumulated effects of mismanagement. But I think the question of corruption is a serious one and I am glad that at least this organisation passed a resolution and a convention against corruption and that more and more African leaders are talking about this. We are trying to set up systems working with the World Bank on a UN development programme to set up mechanisms and strengthen institutions that will prevent the rampant corruption that we see today.

But of course you also have to deal with the question of education and health to prepare a healthy educated workforce to be able to help. I think there are good signs that the international community are now ready to work with the Africans and other developing countries to improve their lot. But we have to understand that although the outside world can help, the basic work has to be done by the people and their leaders.

Robin Lustig:

You referred in your lecture to HIV/Aids in the African context. Here in the hall we have Graham Markeson from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies who has a question for you on that.

Graham Markeson:

The United Nations, at all levels, including the Security Council, has recognised the priority which must be given to struggle against the HIV/Aids pandemic. The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the volunteers are doing a great deal of work all over the world on the issue. But this is insufficient without much more effective contributions from governments, the pharmaceutical industry, civil society as a whole and others. We need to scale up the effort dramatically and we need to address this now in the small window of opportunity we have left to us before whole communities, whole nations and even continents fall into ruin and extreme poverty.

Despite this, all the evidence points to an absence of the kind of total commitment we must obtain if we are to deal with this crisis effectively. Mr Secretary-General, what do you believe you and the United Nations can do to lift governments, industry and all of us involved from paper commitment to real delivery and is there something else we in the international federation and wider civil society should do to support your efforts?

Kofi Annan:

I think you've summarised the problem very eloquently and let me say that I agree entirely with you that we are not doing enough. When we had a special session on HIV/Aids here in this building and we launched the global fund against HIV/Aids, malaria and tuberculosis, we indicated that we needed to scale up and spend about \$10 billion a year. We've got about \$2 billion pledged to the fund which is not enough. Not only that, we have leaders around the world who are refusing to face the issue, who refuse to talk about the issue for traditional and cultural reasons.

I have discussed with leaders - most of them have responded very positively and have taken up the challenge - others refuse to speak up. We should start by providing leadership against this fight in this crusade at all levels starting with this top political leadership and mobilising entire societies to deal with this.

You are right, HIV/Aids is not just a health problem - it is an economic problem, it is a security problem. In some villages and towns in Africa, it is killing teachers faster than they can be replaced. You don't have enough farmhands to go to the farms and harvest and yet we don't have the resources to tackle it and the resources exist. Here I think the civil society and other partners have an important role to play. I am looking at civil society - the private sector foundations and research to try and find a vaccine for HIV/Aids.

I would suggest that in all our communities we ourselves become engaged. We should not sit back and say, I am ok, the problem is elsewhere. We live in an interdependent world with constant movement across borders. Africa is the hardest hit today but the disease is spreading fast in Eastern Europe, in India, in China, in the Caribbean and if we do not do anything about it, we're going to wake up to an epidemic of catastrophic proportions - we're already there but we don't seem to understand it. I think it is a problem that we all need to become engaged in.

We are working with several organisations to try and continue to raise awareness and get the leaders to take steps. You don't need five-star hospitals to be able to treat patients. Countries like Uganda and others are doing very well and they've shown that you can arrest the rate of infection. Even in South Africa the infection of girls under 20 is being reduced. So you can do things and we should organise ourselves and whatever you as individuals or in your community can do to mobilise society and the public to do something will be extremely important.

The resources are there. I have had three meetings with the chairmen of the seven largest pharmaceutical companies encouraging them to reduce the cost of their medication and make sure they are affordable to the poor. One is talking about using generic medication and getting companies to offer treatment to their staff and their communities and several large corporations have taken on the challenge. So if we work in partnership and pool our efforts, we can make a difference. If we don't, we are heading for catastrophe and a real disaster.

Robin Lustig:

You have very cleverly answered a question which I hadn't yet asked you. But I'll read it to you anyway because it came in an e-mail from a listener in America. Jason Wallace wanted to know what pressure the individual in the developed world can bring to bear on governments to address the issues of poverty and Aids in poorer countries.

Sustainable Development

Robin Lustig:

Let's take another question from here in the audience in New York. Philip Shabecoff is an environmental campaigner and journalist.

Philip Shabecoff:

Many commentators have said that the recent world summit on sustainable development in Johannesburg was a major step backwards from the goals and commitments to economically and socially equitable protection of the global environment. What, sir, went wrong and why? And to what extent was the current government in the United States an obstacle to progress?

Kofi Annan:

Let me say that I was there and I disagree that the summit was a setback. Before we got to Johannesburg, quite a lot of people had indicated the conference was going to be a failure. We went to Johannesburg focussing on five areas of concentration: water, sanitation, health, agriculture and productivity and biodiversity built around schemes around us. We walked away from Johannesburg, in my judgment, for the first time putting sustainable development firmly on the table. Getting the world and the delegates and the leaders gathered there to understand that we can fight poverty, we can develop and still protect our planet. But there ought to be a balance between economic activity and the protection of the planet.

It was also significant that we brought in quite a lot of private sector partners and NGOs who agreed to work on certain specific projects and partnerships. Obviously when you have that sort of conference, there are such heightened expectations, that if you do not achieve everything you went there to achieve, one would have said you have failed.

I think the US played a constructive role at this meeting. The President himself wasn't there but the Secretary of State, Colin Powell was there. When he got up to speak, he got a rough reaction. But I may add, those who were protesting and screaming were not Africans, they came from here.

But I should say the conference did help us explain what sustainable development is about - what we need to do on water and sanitation in particular and also what we had to be on energy. We didn't solve all the problems but we did not take back anything we agreed previously which is sometimes a tendency at these conferences that they walk away from agreed positions taken five years ago. This did not happen here. On the contrary, I think we moved a bit forward.

Robin Lustig:

Mr Shabecoff, are you persuaded?

Philip Shabecoff:

It seems to me that at the Rio summit there were specific goals and commitments of financial support and timetables and these were, I believe, lacking at Johannesburg.

Kofi Annan:

Yes, but we went to Johannesburg fully conscious that we will not get those and so from that point it would depend upon where you are sitting - it is either half full or half empty.