

Financial Times Interview with Mark Turner
3 December 2004

MT: Have you considered resigning?

KA: We have a very important agenda to press ahead with.

You've seen the report of the high-level panel on threats, challenges and change, and next month we will issue a report on the millennium project.

And in March a much more consolidated document – which will capture the Millennium Project, implementation of the goals, financing for development as well as the panels report. I will be working with the member states to try and implement these important proposals.

MT: Did you at any stage consider resigning following these calls?

KA: I think resignation is comparatively easy. It is much more difficult to stay on and continue to do the job you are elected to do, and focus on the important agenda of the organization and the membership.

MT: How do you allay the concerns being raised, sufficiently to allow the organization to regain that focus?

KA: Obviously the oil-for-food allegations have had a very negative impact on the organization, and also on the timing of the release of this important document that we are all embracing.

My hope had been that once the independent investigative committee had been set up, we would all wait for them to do their work, and then draw our conclusions and make judgements.

This has not turned out to be the case for some, who have been relentless in their attacks.

But as difficult as it is, I think we should press ahead with a constructive agenda, whilst we cooperate fully with Volcker. I want to get to the bottom of this as anyone, and hopefully we will.

MT: Were the Volcker commission to discover that there were serious problems within UN management, would you consider resigning then?

KA: I think I'll wait to see the report.

MT: Do you believe that under the current system, people can trust that the right people are appointed to do the right jobs, and the way they pursue those jobs are viewed with

sufficient rigour, accountability, transparency? That if they stop doing their jobs in the right way they'll be taken out of the system?

KA: We have some wonderful bright women and men working for this organization, including some particularly bright and active young staffers.

We need to improve our management of our human resources. There's no doubt we can do a better job in identifying, attracting and retaining the best talent.

This is an area that has been under scrutiny for some time, I think there is room for improvement, I would have to admit. We all see that and we need to work harder,

MT: This organization is two things. One is an organization with people who set out to achieve goals mandated by the Security Council and the General Assembly; another is a house where a lot of people from different nations come together. Those two aspects don't always necessarily work in concert.

How do you balance the political imperatives of getting people from around the world, with getting the right people to do the right jobs? Is this something the UN can ever fundamentally address?

KA: As difficult as it sounds to have a staff that has a wide geographic base and at the same time competent, it's not mutually exclusive.

But I will concede that it makes recruitment and identification of talent much more difficult than if it was focused on one particular area.

Government can sometimes push their nationals — yes, there is that kind of pressure, but one need not always succumb to it.

There have been instances where we have resisted it, and normally, even if we were to look at a candidate from a particular country, we always insist on looking at several candidates, which can come from governmental sources or candidates we identify ourselves.

MT: The high-level panel said the UN is a marriage of power and principle. Which is pre-eminent, and is the balance tight?

KA: I think they are right. It is a marriage. I think the base, the constant element which is always there, is the principle. The question is do we always apply it and live up to it? Or (do) power politics and interest sometimes get us to move us away from our principles?

MT: Have you spoken to your son in recent days?

MA: I have spoken to him yes. I can't go into too much detail, but I did speak to him about his relationship with Cotecna. He indicated to me that he and his lawyers are cooperating with the Volcker commission. I encouraged him to do so.

MT: Did he ever lobby you on behalf of anyone?

KA: No.

Not only did he never lobby me, because he also knows that I have always been very sensitive about conflict of interests and it is not something that I would appreciate.

There has been situations where he said, a friend, come with a friend to meet you, they want to shake your hand or something.

MT: And in those circumstances would you sometimes say yes?

KA: Yes, obviously, naturally.

MT: Did you ever receive money from your son?

KA: Absolutely not.

MT: Did you ever have any sense that your son was lobbying, trading on your name taking advantage of your visits, lobbying at the GA?

KA: No, I wasn't aware of that.

MT: Have you discussed that with him since? Has he told you about that?

KA -I think that's getting into something the investigation is getting into, so...

MT: Are you afraid the Congress might withhold funding from the UN? How serious a danger is that?

KA: It has happened in the past, but I hope that it will not happen, because we've been accused of obstructing their work, which was really never our intention, as we have been trying to explain – as Volcker himself explained in his latest letter to Senator Coleman.

We have set up an independent commission. We've given them all the documents. Volcker has indicated, and we agree, that the documents will be released, but in an orderly fashion, as and when he produces his reports. UN documents that could be in the public domain may be released for the public.

MT: Why are these people attacking you?

KA: You'd better ask them, but I'm sure there are many reasons. There are those who

believe that the organization has not been helpful in recent times. There may be other reasons, and of course, as Secretary General, I'm the face of the organization, so I'm the obvious target, as it were.

MT: Do you think there is some validity at the heart of some of these criticisms? In terms of the accountability of the UN?

KA: I would accept there are some constructive criticisms, which we take very seriously. I'm not implying we are a perfect organization, that we've not made mistakes, but we are trying constantly to improve the situation, and the reform is an ongoing process.

Even some of our best friends have sometimes criticized us but in a constructive manner. It's not that we don't expect anyone to criticize us.

MT: There has been a series of questions raised about the secretariat's ability to police itself, with a number of investigations recently, where decisions you've taken have been called into question.

How can you inject some sense of transparency into this process, to make people satisfied that the UN does seriously investigate its own people?

KA: The administration of justice in the organization is something that we are aware has some weaknesses, often delays and bottlenecks. We have tried to improve the system, and also to find other methods of resolving some of these issues as quickly as we can.

On the question of review of complaints, I think there are lots of cases which I am sure have been settled satisfactorily. There have been one or two high-profile cases which have drawn lots of attention, but I would assure you that the review and the complaints were looked at very seriously.

MT: Is there a need for an independent investigative arm – the OIOS, but independent, which people can have trust in?

KA: The original concept of OIOS [Office of Internal Oversight Services] was meant to be independent and be able to report to the council, so there's an element of independence in its mandate, and it does report to the GA.

There are other measures we are looking at; for example establishing an accountability task force. Obviously the OIOS function can be strengthened, but I think what is important also is the attitude of those who work in the building, within this organization; and the sense of fairness that they need to be constantly aware of

MT: Carl Levin made a point the other day that the US was also responsible for mismanaging the oil for food programme, by allowing smuggling to Jordan, Syria and Turkey. Is it fair to say the US and other governments were responsible for this problem?

KA: Oil smuggling started right from the beginning, after the war, in 1991/92, and oil being sent to Turkey, Jordan and Syria was well known by everyone.

MT: Is there a prima facie case to say that well-connected European politicians helped subvert the oil for food programme?

KA: I don't know. We've heard allegations. We haven't really seen the evidence yet.

MT: How are you bearing up personally?

KA: Obviously it's difficult for me as Secretary General of the UN and as a father. But we need to continue with our work.

MT: Do you get much sleep?

KA: I do sleep.

MT: What is your mood? Kofi defiant?

KA: I wish we would all hold our horses and not jump to conclusions until the report of the investigative committee is in.

In today's atmosphere, where there is leak after leak, and relentless negative articles, one can very easily gain the impression that everything that is alleged is true.

You repeat it three or four times, and you begin to believe it and expect everybody else to believe it.