

Yale-UN Oral History Project

Ramses Nassif
Jean Krasno, Interviewer
March 9, 1998
Geneva, Switzerland

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Yale-UN Oral History

Ramses Nassif

Interviewed by: Jean Krasno

March 9, 1998

in Geneva, Switzerland

Jean Krasno: For the record Mr., Nassif would you please provide us with some background on yourself and where you were born, educated and when you began your work at the United Nations?



Ramses Nassif: I'm Ramses Nassif, an Egyptian, born in Cairo. I graduated from the American University in Cairo in 1944. In 1945-46 I worked as Assistant Professor in Journalism at the American University and all my life I have been more or less a journalist. I joined the United Nations in 1953, incidentally the same year the late Dag Hammarskjöld was elected Secretary-General of the UN, succeeding Trygve Lie. But there was no connection between the two, it just happened, a coincidence. And from 1961-71, I was the Spokesman for Secretary-General U Thant, the third Secretary-General of the UN and when U Thant retired in 1971, I moved to Geneva, where I held the post of Director of Information. I took early retirement in 1981. 1988 I had a book published by Saint Martin's Press in New York and Hearst & Co. in London, and right now I'm living in Geneva writing a monthly column or article for the *Tribune de* published here. That's the focus of my work now.

JK: And your book, that you published, is on the life of U Thant?

RN: It was actually on the U Thant years as Secretary-General from 1961-1971. Brian Urquhmi whom I believe you know, was kind enough to write the foreword to the book.

JK: I see, a.k. Well, that's good. We had discussed earlier that for the purposes of this interview we would talk about your role as Spokesman for the Secretary-General U Thant, in those years that you were working with him. What was his position in the UN at the time of Dag Hammarskjöld's death? He died September 17, 1961, in a plane crash. So what was U Thant at that time?

RN: At that time U Thant was the ambassador of Burma to the United Nations. And he was a leading member of the so-called Afro-Asian group, a group that was founded after the Bandung Conference, Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. And he was also the Chairman of the Expanding Committee of the Afro-Asian Group on Algeria. This was a small unit, established to monitor the development of Algeria's case. Algeria was part of France at that time before its independence. The circumstances of U Thant's election was partly fate, partly the diligence and the concerted efforts of two gentlemen who are no longer

with us. Frederick Boland, of Ireland, who was the President of the Assembly in 1960-61, and Adlai Stevenson, the US Ambassador to the UN. Both were friends of U Thant and it was Boland who conceived the idea that perhaps U Thant, coming from the group of the Afro-Asians and from a small, neutral country in Asia would be a candidate that the Soviets would not dare to veto. At that time, the Soviets were hung up on the idea of a Troika, which was promoted or rather advanced by Khrushchev in the General Assembly of 1960. It's the Assembly in which there was that inelegant to say the least, act of Mr. Khrushchev with his shoe pounding the table in front of the cameras, a disgraceful performance.

JK: Yes, a very famous event.



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RN: An "infamous" event, perhaps is a better word. It was Boland who was pushing for U Thant and in fact he took U Thant with him, because at that time U Thant was the President of the Afro-Asian group. They would change the presidency every month. They went to see Gromyko (who was there as head of the delegation to the UN for the General Assembly) to discuss the question. This was after the sudden death of Dag Hammarskjöld as you said, in September 1961. They went to discuss the inadvisability of the Troika and when U Thant accompanied Boland, he was completely unaware that Boland had in mind him, personally, as a suitable candidate. Other names were mentioned, of course. One was Mongi Slim, the President of the General Assembly in

1961. He succeeded Boland. The other was Ralph Enckell from Finland. So those were the three names mentioned. U Thant, Mongi Slim and Ralph Enckell. Boland reported to Adlai Stevenson, who incidentally was a friend of U Thant. It was U Thant who briefed Stevenson about the meeting with Gromyko. Stevenson informed the Western group including the French. Apparently the French were not enthusiastic about U Thant, because he didn't know French. And then there was a silly rumor circulating that somebody said that U Thant happened to be a short person in height. At that point, U Thant -- an amusing incident but is true -- was very friendly with Bill Oatis, the correspondent from the Associated Press. Whenever he saw Bill he stopped and chatted with him. So he stopped Bill deliberately and made a rather undiplomatic statement, "tell them, Bill, that I am in a sense taller than Napoleon and Napoleon did not speak English." It was an undiplomatic remark from a man who was extremely extremely affable, polite and very, very meticulous about everything he said, but he did say that.

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JK: Now did he serve as Acting _____ for a period of time?

RN: Yes, for one year he was Acting Secretary-General -- he was appointed Acting Secretary-General on November 3rd 1961.

JK: And did the Security Council appoint him Acting Secretary-General?

RN: Yes, the Security Council elected him unanimously as Acting Secretary-General with the idea that he would serve the period that Dag Hammarskjöld would have served until 1963, because Dag Hammarskjöld died while he was serving his second term. But, since we are on the subject, we can conclude this part, after his intervention in the Cuban missile crisis, on October-November of 1962, the Security Council confirmed him for the full period of the remaining years as Secretary-General. So he was Acting Secretary-General for one year. Then he was reelected in 1966 for another period that carried him until the end of 1971. He served ten years. So I mention all this so it will be under one point.



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JK: That's very excellent. Thank you for clarifying that.

And then when he was elected as Secretary-General, not just as Acting Secretary-General, was that also unanimous within the Security Council?

RN: It was.

JK: It was?

RN: It was unanimous. The first time it was unanimous, the second time it was unanimous and it was unanimous the third time when he was extended for the other five years.

JK: For the next five years. O.K. That's very helpful. When he came into office in 1961, Dag Hammarskjöld had died in the airplane crash on his way to negotiate a peace agreement in the Congo, and we'll come back to the Missile Crisis, but I wanted to ask you some questions about the Congo. Because U Thant stepped into a period of time in which there was a lot of chaos and there was a lot of controversy over the peacekeeping operation in the Congo.

RN: He inherited the Congo.

JK: He inherited the Congo, that's right.

RN: From day one and it was a real mess. Unfortunately still is today, very unfortunate and an unhappy situation. The Congo operation was established by the Security Council on the initiative Dag Hammarskjöld. It was called UNOC, in UN lingo, following the French language for the acronym. And at that time Tsonbe was continuing to fight against the UN to cement the secession of the Katanga province. The hostilities started between the UN force and Tsonbe, who was under pressure from his own advisors and the gendarmerie. Finally, the UN gave the order to clear all mercenaries from Katanga and enforce the objectives of the mandate that called for "freedom of movement."



JK: Yes, actually I wanted to ask you about that. Because that was a very important decision for the UN to be able to use force to remove the mercenaries and you mentioned that it was a difficult decision.

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RN: It was a very difficult decision. It was a decision U Thant took reluctantly but there was no other ways to deal with it, just to put an end to the chaotic situation there. Tsonbe was acting as his own free agent. Although there was a central government, he was acting as President in Katanga. There was a government for the whole of the Congo at that time which was the central government, which Prime Minister Adoula and Tshombe hoped that the UN would ignore. But finally there was an agreement between Adoula and Tshombe -- the Belgian Government played a role in bringing them together because they

had good influence on Tshombe. That was in January 1963, when the Belgians got a message from Tshombe that he would terminate the secession in Katanga and would cooperate with the United Nations. I am looking from notes here because I don't want to say something that is incorrect, but the notes are my own, from my book. Kasavubu, who was the President of Congo, granted amnesty to Tshombe and to members of Tshombe's government. On the 29th of June 1964, U Thant submitted, when all this was done, the report to the Security Council on the withdrawal of the UN force in the Congo. But unfortunately more conflicts and more incidents followed. There was a hostage taking of foreigners in Stanleyville. Then Tshombe decided to flee the country in October 1965. He was living in Madrid in Spain and in 1967 a very unusual incident took place while he was flying from Majorca back to the mainland. His private plane was hijacked by a French mercenary and taken to Algeria. And till today we have read a lot of conflicting reports whether this mercenary was on the pay of the new government of the Congo, and he did that in order to have Tshombe extradited back to the Congo. I don't know, at least I don't know the whole story. It was strange to take Tshombe to Algeria. The Algerians put him under surveillance outside the city of Algiers. And then Mobutu came to power and asked the Algerians to extradite Tshombe, but they refused. For some reason, perhaps because at that time Mobutu was close to Washington. Whether the Algerians felt that by doing that they are making a gesture against Washington, I don't know. They kept him, and finally he died of a heart attack in June 1969, in captivity. This is the winding up of the Congo operation.

JK: Right, and Tshombe is a complex and interesting character and he came to a kind of ironic end.

RN: Yes, rather sad, he died in isolation, outside his country and yet he was quite a figure, quite a conflict, too.

JK: Well, I wanted to go back to the decision to use force. Because you mentioned that the Africans and others in the UN had put some pressure to end this secession. So could you explain that a little, that the Africans did not want Katanga to secede? Was that the issue?

The logo for the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, featuring a stylized banner with the name "Dag Hammarskjöld" in a large, bold, sans-serif font, and the word "LIBRARY" in a smaller, all-caps, sans-serif font below it. A faint United Nations emblem is visible in the background behind the text.

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RN: Yes, absolutely. They were for the territorial integrity of the Congo.

JK: And the US was, in general, in favor of the integrity of the entire.

RN: Yes, the US was, but not the Europeans. Not Belgian, and not Britain and not France, but the US was.

JK: And how did the Soviets at that time play into this?

RN: Well, the Soviets played an important role at the beginning when Lumumba was Prime Minister but not after the assassination of Lumumba, caused by mercenaries. That was one of the reasons why the Soviets turned against Hammarskjöld and that was the reason why Khrushchev, at the Assembly of 1960, attacked Hammarskjöld personally. Hammarskjöld retorted with a very short response saying, No, I have no intention of resigning, I will not resign as long as the smaller, weak nations among the member states, need me and need the United Nations. And he received standing ovation in response to Khrushchev's boisterous speech that he must resign and be replaced by a Troika. So the Soviet Union at that point had very little influence in the Congo. They received a blow to their influence and prestige that was one of the main reasons why they turned against Dag Hammarskjöld.

JK: Now you have mentioned the Troika. Just briefly could you explain what their proposal was?

RN: The proposal was, they wanted the Secretary-General to be replaced by a Troika. One from the Eastern bloc, one from the Western bloc and one from the Non-Aligned Movement.

JK: I see, and the three would serve together?

RN: They would serve together as the Secretary-General. Nobody bought that suggestion. President Kennedy renounced it at the time. Prime Minister Nehru of India, who was a powerful, respected figure, was against the Troika. So nobody bought the Troika, but when Hammarskjöld met his tragic death near Ndola, the Soviets revived it but did not find much support. When Boland went over to discuss this with Gromyko, he of mentioned it casually and dropped the subject completely, and that's why the Western group felt that they could get someone not from the West but from this emerging Afro-Asian group that the Soviet Union would not veto, and they didn't.

JK: *a.K.* that's a very interesting background on how that developed. I just had another question on the Congo and then we can move on. As you mentioned U Thant had authorized the use of force to remove the mercenaries and after that the fighting still really continued for about a year. Then in December of 1962 the gendarmerie in Katanga launched an attack on the UN forces that were in Elizabethville.

RN: Yes, in December 1962, they randomly harassed and fired upon the UN forces in Katanga. They shot down a UN helicopter killing an Indian officer serving in ONUC. Responding to an urgent request from Robert Gardiner, who was the Secretary-General's representative in the Congo and General Prem Chand, the Indian Commander of the UN forces, U Thant reluctantly issued the order to remove the gendarmerie and the mercenaries from Elizabethville.

JK: O.K. So he had received word that the helicopter had been shot down?

RN: Oh yes, those incidents were reported.

JK: So in that sense, because there had been an attack the UN could respond because it was considered self-defense.

RN: Yes, self-defense. Here the British and Belgian governments posed serious objections and urged him to rescind the order. They protested that any more action by the United Nations would result in the destruction of the Union Minière, the vast Belgian owned industrial complex in Katanga.

JK: But despite the British and the Belgian objection, U Thant continued the order.

RN: The order prevailed until this thing was cleared up. Yes, then there was a cease-fire.

JK: They decided to take a town called Jadotville in order to actually remove them. They followed the mercenaries till they could actually remove them. So it went a little bit beyond an order of simply self-defense.

RN: Oh yes, you're quite right. It was a breakdown, can I read another paragraph?

JK: Sure, that's fine.



RN: That was December 30. Somehow there was a breakdown in communication between ONUC and UN Headquarters in New York on Jan 3rd 1963. Gardiner cabled that large UN forces consisting of units from Ethiopia, Tunisia, India, Ireland, and Ghana boosted by ten fighter planes and two reconnaissance aircraft provided by Ethiopia had entered the town in Jadotville. They have met no opposition and the mercenaries have fled. They moved forward, destroyed two air bases and occupied more vantage points.

JK: O.K. Perhaps this is a long time ago and is hard to recall, but there was an important period there where they had authorized the use of force because they had been attacked, because the helicopter had been shot down. But then the UN went on to take Jadotville which was not necessarily an act of self-defense but you had said briefly there

that there was a breakdown in communication. Was there really a breakdown in communication?

RN: Oh yes, there was.

JK: So the UN force thought that they had the authorization to continue to follow the mercenaries?

RN: To continue and perhaps also a feeling among them, among the forces there, (here I'm speculating) now that we've started the job, let's finish it, rather than stop in mid-stream and then have to do it all over again.



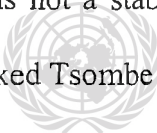
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JK: Do you recall what U Thant's response was when he heard that they had moved forward and taken the town of Jadotville? Was he surprised?

RN: He was surprised but I don't think he was unhappy about it, in New York, the man in charge of the operation was the late Ralph Bunche, assisted by Brian Urquhart. I think the feeling was, since they have stumbled, let's give them enough leeway to finish their job. Then, during that period there was a message from the Belgian Government saying that Tsombe had decided early in January 1963 to end the secession and to come back to the fold of the independent Congo provided that Kasavubu would extend his amnesty to all members of Tsombe's government.

JK: So was it felt that Tsombe had decided to end this secession and sign a peace agreement because of the force that the UN had taken to remove the mercenaries from Katanga?

RN: Yes, I think that that was an important element in his decision and I suppose I could add on my own without implicating anybody else since most of those people are no longer with us. Tsombe was never a popular figure within the UN, never liked. In fact, at one point U Thant said publicly at a press conference when Tsombe's name came up, he said, "To my knowledge, Mr. Tsombe is not a stable man," coming from U Thant was surprising, so to put it bluntly, nobody liked Tsombe and nobody shed any tears for him.



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JK: Had U Thant been frustrated by Tsombe and his behavior?

RN: By giving his word and changing it twenty four hours later on, more than once.

JK: More than once. The other question that I wanted to ask you on the Congo. The UN left the Congo in June of 1964. By the time the Congo operation had ended there had been one hundred and twenty-six UN personnel killed, including Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General, and the total costs were four hundred million dollars. In that period, in the early sixties, four hundred million dollars was a lot of money.

RN: It was the largest operation ever undertaken by the UN, in the 1960s.

JK: What was the reaction within the UN to the expense of the Congo operation?

RN: I don't think everybody realized that it was a very expensive operation but the member states paid up, the only country that did not pay was the Soviet Union.

JK: And why was it that they did not pay?

RN: They didn't pay because they said that they did not approve of this particular operation.



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JK: They didn't approve?

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RN: They didn't approve, and that was what started the continuation of fooling around with the voluntary contribution to cover peacekeeping. It started then. They withheld their contributions to the Congo operation and, in fact, U Thant in his first official trip to Moscow made a statement on the Moscow radio. He said if the Soviet people were to know the facts about the Congo operation, they would not take this stand of opposing the operation or withhold their contribution to it. That part of his interview was in the radio interview but was not broadcast.

JK: That part was not broadcast? I see.

RN: It was not broadcast and he found that out later, of course, by checking with our information office in Moscow. That part was censored out. That was in July 1962, his first official visit to Moscow.

JK: Now, there's a provision in the Charter that if any one country is two years behind in their payment.

RN: Article 19.



JK: Yes, that they would lose their vote in the General Assembly. So what happened to the Soviets during that period of time?

RN: What happened to the Soviets was that we had a General Assembly that was completely paralyzed because of that, because of this Article 19. Which incidentally, if you want to put it in a historical perspective, as you know the US owes the UN over a billion dollars in arrears, but the US has always managed to pay that much to cover its arrears so that it will not exceed the two years. You are aware of all that, so I don't have to bother you with these details.

JK: So how did this General Assembly work around that?

RN: Well, they didn't. They had a General Assembly that did not function. And they were completely blocked and stalemated by this and went in and out and nothing happened. It was very unfortunate, a year lost, if you like, because of the Soviets.

JK: Eventually they did pay?

RN: Eventually they did. They found a formula to say that they are paying under the guise of the regular contribution, eventually they did.

JK: I see, so they worked it out so that it was under the regular dues.

RN: Under the regular dues, so that they kept the principle of not giving in. It took some time, but they came around to it.

JK: So then their vote was restored?

RN: Yes.

JK: All right, I just had wanted to clarify that issue. Now, let's go back. Because these things are all happening at the same time, but its good to talk about them separately

and issue by issue. U Thant came in as Secretary-General, and as you had mentioned earlier, we had the Cuban Missile Crisis. How did the UN first become involved in that?

RN: In the Cuban Missile Crisis?

JK: Yes.

RN: It all started when the Soviet Union built bases in Cuba for missiles that were capable of carrying nuclear warheads of a range of two thousand miles. Here I'm quoting the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy. On the 22nd of October 1962, President Kennedy told the American people that the USSR had built those missiles, and as a result, "I have decided to declare naval and air quarantine of Cuba and around their international waters." In the same evening, Ambassador Stevenson asked for an emergency meeting of the Security Council.

JK: I see, O.K. So Ambassador Stevenson from the United States called for an emergency meeting of the Security Council.

RN: Yes, meanwhile an hour later, Ambassador Zorin of the USSR called for an emergency meeting. Zorin happened to be the President of the Security Council that month.

JK: Oh yes, so Zorin was the President?

RN: Yes, and the Cubans in turn asked for a meeting. So, the Council met on the 23rd and on the 24th and it was completely deadlocked because the US was asking for the removal of the missiles and the Soviets introduced a resolution calling the US naval blockade on Cuba an act of war. Cuba, protesting the US naval blockade. So there was a complete deadlock and that's when U Thant decided at the following meeting, on the 24th of October, 1962, to make a statement.

JK: Now just let's talk about that Security Council meeting for just a moment. U Thant, was he present during the meeting of the Council on that day?



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RN: The Secretary-General is always at every meeting of the Security Council.

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JK: U Thant would be, because other Secretaries-General did not always do that.

RN: No, no.

JK: No, Boutros-Ghali.

RN: Boutros-Ghali? He was the exception, but every Secretary-General from Trygve Lie, Dag Hammarskjöld, U Thant, after U Thant came Waldheim, after Waldheim came

de Cuéllar and now we have Kofi Annan. They always attended every meeting of the Security Council unless he, the Secretary-General was away on an official visit.

JK: So Boutros-Ghali was the only one?

RN: The only one. In my judgment, it was a mistake because you are implying that he had other more important things to do. He's a fellow Egyptian, so I don't want to say too much.

JK: That's right. So U Thant was at the meeting, so what was the status of the Cubans at that time? Were they on the Security Council?

RN: No, no. They were invited, because they were a party to the conflict. But Cuba was not a member.

JK: O.K. All right, so they were all in the room together?

RN: They were all in the room together, and then U Thant found that there was this deadlock and three resolutions. None of them would go through because the Soviet Union would veto the US draft, and the US would veto the Soviet and the Cuban drafts. So there was a complete deadlock. The situation was very serious because it was eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation between the two nuclear powers. And so, U Thant decided to

make a public statement and dispatch two identical appeals to President Kennedy and Chairman Khrushchev. Incidentally, at that point some of his advisors said, “you know you are acting Secretary-General.” That was before his confirmation in 1962, because his confirmation came in November after the crisis ended. The advisors argued: “The whole future of the UN might be jeopardized by your action.” And his reply was simple. U Thant said, “you know, all these things are academic. If there's a nuclear war, nothing will be left of the Secretary-General or even the existence of the UN or mankind. So I've made up my mind to do it and I am going to do it.” So he went ahead and he made this appeal, it was a very dramatic appeal directly to both leaders to avoid the bureaucracy of going through their missions and their delegations. His appeal was based on the fact that the very fate of mankind was at stake. In his two direct appeals to Kennedy and Khrushchev, he asked for a cooling period of two to three weeks. That no further arms should be sent from the Soviet Union to Cuba and meanwhile the US ships that were near Cuba should take every measure to avoid any confrontation.

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In U Thant's direct identical appeals to President Kennedy and Khrushchev, he asked that there should be a suspension of all arms shipments to Cuba and meanwhile a suspension of the current measures involving the searching of ships going to Cuba. He added that, “I make myself available to all parties and offer my good officers.”

He also sent an appeal to Castro in order not to leave him out of the picture, after all the missiles were on his territory, asking for restraint. There's an interesting anecdote here. Mr. Zorin did not like this appeal -- he thought that U Thant should condemn the US naval blockade but he was miffed to see before him some fifteen ambassadors lining up to congratulate U Thant at the end of the Council meeting. He wanted to see U Thant who told him, "I am very tired. It is very late at night. Perhaps you can come tomorrow." So when he saw him the following day, Zorin protested and U Thant asked, "are you protesting in your personal capacity or on instructions from your government?" He always had this blunt, direct language very unlike his Buddhist, quiet demeanor and usual polite way. Zorin was taken aback and went away. Then later on in the day U Thant received an urgent call from Ambassador Morozov, the Deputy of Zorin, asking to see U Thant urgently because he had a message for him. It was from Khrushchev saying: "Dear U Thant I accept your proposals and I am willing to discuss them with you and the US." So Zorin had made a faux pas. He was speaking either without instructions or he was completely in the dark. Maybe he was not aware of what was happening in Cuba and that was the assumption of U Thant.

JK: I see. When you say that U Thant made an appeal, was this in the form of a speech to the Security Council?

RN: Speech to the Security Council plus direct messages to Moscow and Washington.

JK: O.K. And the messages were sent how?

RN: They were sent by open cable, because he had read them, these messages were open not sent by code, open and with copies to the US Mission, the Soviet Mission and the Cuban Mission.

JK: O.K. The one to Moscow was sent directly to Khrushchev and the one to the United States to President Kennedy? And they were by cable? Are there copies of the cables in the records?

RN: Yes, in the archives and in the Security Council records.

JK: O.K. So for people doing further research.

RN: Yes, yes.

JK: And he also made a speech to the Security Council itself?

RN: Yes, he read these two identical messages in the course of his intervention in the Security Council. This speech, his personal appeal, plus the identical messages he had sent to Khrushchev and to Kennedy. And the following day both leaders responded favorably. Because of this incident with U Thant and Zorin, Khrushchev decided to send

one of his top aides, Vassily Kuznetsov, the first deputy Prime Minister. President Kennedy appointed John McCloy, a personal friend. He was a banker as head of the US delegation, in fact, he was senior to Adlai Stevenson. I suppose being a big name and a close friend of the President, he led the negotiations that took place on the 38th floor on how to resolve the crisis. There were about three or four different messages, but there is no room or time now to go into it all: U Thant, Khrushchev; Khrushchev, U Thant; U Thant, Kelmedy; Kennedy, U Thant; U Thant, Castro; Castro, U Thant. All these were exchanged, but immediately there was an indication that the Soviets were willing to dismantle the missile bases and carry back the missiles to the Soviet Union. At that point, when this flimsy agreement was reached, Castro sent a very angry message to U Thant announcing that the US had brought in US troops to the island on the base, a part of Cuba, called Guantanamo. He called this a dangerous threat to the independence of Cuba. Castro invited U Thant to Cuba. U Thant decided to go because he felt that what was happening between the US, through his mediation, and the Soviet Union was keeping Castro out of the picture and Castro was in a position to do something that might sabotage the agreement, so he [U Thant] decided to go. He did go.

JK: O.K. So you went with U Thant when he went to Cuba. When was that? Do you recall what the date was?

RN: Yes, he left New York on the 30th of October to Havana, on a chartered Brazilian aircraft and he arrived the same day in the afternoon with the hope that Castro would

accept some kind of UN supervision over the removal of the missiles in Cuba. This was the hope and the intention was to keep Castro quiet and to give him the deference and the respect so that he would not do anything to upset the agreement reached between the Americans and the Soviets with the Secretary-General in New York. That was the real purpose of the trip. So when he arrived, on the same plane the UN chartered for this purpose, some eager beaver UN officials thought that the UN mission to Cuba for observing the missiles was a fait accompli, so they thought they should send the communications gear, photocopy machines, all the paraphernalia needed to set up a mission. U Thant was unaware of this. Nobody bothered to clear it with him. So when he arrived in Havana he was met by Raul Roa, Foreign Minister of Cuba, who was there to greet him. The reception was very friendly, but soldiers immediately surrounded the plane. And before U Thant's car departed there was an officer who came and whispered something into Raul Roa's ears and nothing was said, but in the car, Raul Roa said, "Mr. Secretary-General, what are all these boxes you brought with you?" The Secretary-General was surprised: "what boxes?" U Thant said, "I don't know but I'll certainly find out." So as soon as he was inside the guesthouse he called in Don Thomas, special aide on security matters. He said, "Don what are these boxes?" Don said, "nothing sir, what boxes? Maybe General Indarjit Rikhye, the military advisor might know." So he called in Rikhye. Rikhye said, "no, I don't know."

JK: And General Rikhye had come with you?

RN: Yes, General Rikhye was in the party. Now if you want the names of the people, there was Omar Lutfi, who was U Thant's closest political advisor, a former Egyptian ambassador who joined the UN Secretariat earlier that year and switched from ambassador; then there was Brigadier General Rikhye from India, who was the military advisor to the Secretary-General, he was in the party, and then Hernan Tavares Desa, Brazilian Head of the Office of Public Information, Miguel Marine, interpreter, Donald Thomas, Hanna Platz, a secretary, and myself. That was the whole party.

JK: So someone back in New York had thought that the UN was going to set up an office there and had put in all the office equipment.

RN: Without U Thant's knowledge, which was a stupid thing to do, because first of all they should have cleared it with the Secretary-General. And the Secretary-General would have cleared it, in turn, with the Cubans. We were going there to talk to them not to set up a mission with or without their consent. So this was one of those incidents, but happily it did not mar his negotiations with Castro, because they believed him and he was telling the truth that he had no knowledge of this. At the moment he heard about it he ordered that the boxes should be left back on the plane. And there was another plane waiting with more equipment and more people in New York.

JK: So they kept that plane from actually taking off?

RN: Yes, he asked Rikhye to speak to C.V. Narasimhan and to speak to him in Hindi and Urdu to tell him to convey the order from the Secretary-General to keep that plane in New York and don't have it fly to Havana because we were sure that our lines were being tapped.

JK: Narasimhan, and what was his position?

RN: He was chef de cabinet.

JK: Narasimhan was the chef de cabinet for U Thant back in New York. O.K.

RN: So Rikhye from Havana on the instructions of U Thant told Narasimhan to keep that plane in New York.

JK: I had never heard of that incident, that's very interesting, that's great.

RN: It is in my book: I would have been delighted to have given you a copy of it but its the last one I have. But if you want it is available in the bookshop and in the library.

JK: Yes, I'll do that. Thank you.

RN: I would have been glad to give you a copy of the book, but I don't have another copy. And so in the talks with Castro, it was his delegation of three people, Rikhye, Lutfi and Tavares Desa and he didn't get anywhere with Castro. Castro wanted no supervision from the United Nations and he was bitterly against the agreement reached in New York without his knowledge, without his blessing. But U Thant appealed for the sake of peace, for the sake of the safety of his country because at that time there were a lot of Generals in the United States saying, "Let's bomb the hell out of them and invade Cuba. But luckily President Kennedy did not listen to them. So Lutfi sent U Thant a note saying: "you'll suggest to Castro to meet with him alone, tête-à-tête." U Thant immediately accepted that proposal. They met alone the following day, they reached some kind of agreement. Castro had intended to attack Khrushchev in a speech saying that he had sold him down the river by reaching an agreement with the Americans. U Thant appealed to him to moderate his speech and not to say anything to upset what was happening. Castro said he would do his best. And towards the end of the meeting, before we departed, U Thant asked Castro, on humanitarian grounds, if he would send the body of Major Anderson. Major Anderson was a pilot of a U2 that was shot down over Havana. I suppose he was there to take pictures of the missiles. Castro said, "Yes, I will do it. That night, that same night, after the talks with Castro in the afternoon were through, that evening after dinner, the Soviet ambassador accompanied by a Soviet General came to see U Thant at his residence.

JK: This was the ambassador to Cuba from the Soviet Union?

RN: Accompanied by this General. They wanted to see U Thant alone. And they did. And they saw him to say that “on instructions from Moscow we have started disassembling all bases and the missiles will be shipped.” That was the 31st of October and “the missiles will be shipped back on the 2nd of November,” three days later. U Thant was elated with this news from the horse's mouth so to speak, not from Castro but from the people who knew. But when he met with Castro alone, U Thant sensed that Castro was informed about the visit, but was not informed about what transpired in the meeting, but he didn't say anything to Castro, and Castro didn't know, but when we arrived in New York he gave a brief statement at the airport. There were three hundred correspondents there. It was at Idlewild Airport.



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JK: So U Thant when he came in, made a brief statement?

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RN: At the airport, simply saying that I have had positive talks with President Castro and while I was there I was reliably informed that the missiles will be removed on the 2nd of November and at my request the body of Major Anderson will be taken back to the United States. This was the beginning of the quieting down of the crisis.

JK: I see, O.K. O.K. So you were in the meeting with Castro in Havana?

RN: No, I was not in the meeting with Castro, I was briefed by U Thant. Nor was I at the meeting with the ambassador because only the three, it was U Thant, the Soviet ambassador and the Soviet General. But U Thant told me what transpired and then, of course, it was in the press release that we prepared together which he read at the airport on arrival from Havana.

JK: But was it your impression when you were in Cuba that Castro did not want the missiles removed?

RN: Absolutely, he did not and he wanted to bargain with the US about that. But the Soviet Union decided to remove the missiles and to disassemble the bases, after Moscow had received from the US a pledge, coming from Kennedy, that he was going to lift the blockade and will not invade Cuba. There were some other secret deals between the US and USSR regarding Turkey, but it was not part of the UN. It was a bilateral agreement between them, the US and the Soviet Union, but the UN was not involved.

JK: So Castro was angry about the missiles being removed and he was going to give a speech in Havana attacking Khrushchev?

RN: Yes, but he made that speech and his reference to Khrushchev was very mild so he kept his word to U Thant. After that, there was this attempt to appease Castro.

JK: O.K. So could you explain that?

RN: Yes, but I don't want to talk your ears off. To help soothe Castro, Moscow dispatched Anastas Mikoyan, Deputy Prime Minister, to Havana and on route he made a one day stopover in New York and gave a press conference to deny to the world that there was any rift between the Soviet Union and Cuba. Mikoyan was a terrific performer, he knew how to field the questions from reporters and succeeded in giving the impression that the crisis was over.

JK: O.K. So he had a private meeting with U Thant?



RN: With U Thant and President Kennedy. And on January 7, 1963, U Thant received a joint letter signed by Stevenson and Kuznetsov. It read: "On behalf of the governments of the United States of America and the Soviet Union, we express our appreciation of your efforts in assisting our governments to avert the serious threat to peace which recently arose in the Caribbean area." It's a Security Council document.

JK: O.K. Well that was a very important period of time and a very important intervention on the part of U Thant.

RN: And we were very close to disaster. Following the years U Thant went out of his way to give credit to the wisdom and statesmanship of the two leaders, Kennedy and

Khrushchev. Neither of them was a warmonger or a saber rattler. Their restraint and wisdom saved, what could have been a world war, we wouldn't be here talking about it.

JK: Right, exactly. Well, again there were many crises that were going on during the time that U Thant was Secretary-General. Now I'd like to move to the Middle East, and talk about what was going on in the Middle East at that time. There was the UN Emergency Force, was there, on Egyptian soil.

RN: On Egyptian soil because the Israelis would not have it on their soil.

JK: The Israelis refused to have the peacekeepers on Israeli territory.

RN: UNEF was stationed on Egyptian soil as a result of an agreement reached between Dag Hammarskjöld and President Nasser, after marathon talks that lasted some seven or eight hours outside Cairo, but as you know, UNEF was established under a General Assembly resolution.

JK: That's right. It was a General Assembly resolution. Now, where were you during that period of time? Because you weren't the spokesman for U Thant because he wasn't the Secretary-General then? What were you doing then?

RN: I was in the UN Secretariat. I was in the Press Section.

JK: You were in the Press Section of the Secretariat. O.K. So you were aware of what was going on in the General Assembly at the time of the creation of the first UNEF?

RN: Yes, the idea of UNEF was conceived by Lester Pearson, Prime Minister of Canada. And he's the one who came up with the idea -- discussed it with John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State, who liked it. The Security Council was blocked because the British and French used their veto on a US resolution. That's after the invasion of the Suez Canal in 1956.



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JK: Right, and then the issue was switched to the General Assembly.

RN: Under the Uniting for Peace resolution.

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JK: Do you recall exactly how the mechanism took place, where they switched it.

Was it a voting in the Security Council or was it a vote in the General Assembly?

RN: It was a vote in the General Assembly to have an emergency session of the General Assembly since the Security Council was stalemated because of the vetoes of the French and the British.

JK: So by calling on the Uniting for Peace, I understand that there are several ways that you can do that, you can actually have a vote in the Security Council to switch it. But in this particular case the General Assembly appealed.

RN: The General Assembly was called at the request of the United States, because the US was one hundred percent insisting that action should be taken. Henry Cabot Lodge introduced a resolution condemning the British -- French invasion. President Eisenhower went as far as to cut off the financial aid to Israel as a result of their participation in the invasion. UNEF was created by that resolution. It was thanks to the energy of the late Dag Hammarskjöld, assisted by Ralph Bunche and Brian Urquhart, who managed to put the force together and dispatch it -- that was the price to withdraw Israeli, French, and British from Egyptian territory.

JK: So you were a member of the Press Corps?

RN: No, not the Press Corps. I was with the United Nations in the Press Section.

JK: O.K. In the United Nations, in the Press Section of the United Nations. So you wrote press releases for the UN. So you were not writing for say an Egyptian newspaper?

RN: No, no. Before that I was, but not in 1956, because I joined the United Nations in 1953, as I said in the introduction.

JK: O.K. At any rate, the UN force had been there since 1956, but by 1967 President Nasser had asked to have the UNEF removed.

RN: I'll give you the exact date, the first word of the decision of Nasser was May the 16th 1967. And it was in a message from the Egyptian Chief of Staff General Fawzi to General Rikhye. General Rikhye at that time was the Commander of UNEF. We mentioned General Rikhye before, but that was in 1962, he was a military advisor to U Thant, in 1967 he was a Commander of UNEF, with headquarters in Gaza. And that message for the withdrawal of UNEF, which was wrong in procedure, came from the Chief of Staff of the Egyptian Army, to General Rikhye.



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JK: And that was Fawzi?

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RN: Yes, his name was Fawzi, General Fawzi.

JK: So General Fawzi sent a message to General Rikhye.

RN: It was rather ambiguous. He said for security reasons. I have a text of the message if you're interested. I can read it. It was ambiguous, to remove UNEF for security reasons -- remove them urgently. So, Rikhye forwarded that message to U Thant.

JK: O.K. So General Rikhye then forwarded that message to U Thant?

RN: Yes.

JK: But General Fawzi had not sent the message to U Thant, he had sent it to General Rikhye.

RN: Yes, but this request, should come from the Government of Egypt to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Which was not the case. But that came later, a couple of days later, they sent an official request for the removal of UNEF.



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JK: O.K. So General Rikhye sent it on to U Thant. So what was U Thant's initial response?

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RN: His initial response was shock, because he was sure that this would mean, if carried out, war. And he said so, he warned the Egyptians of the consequences. He immediately saw the ambassadors of the countries providing the forces of UNEF.

JK: He met with the contributing countries in New York?

RN: In New York, and they were all of the opinion that if the Egyptians don't want us there, we have no intention of staying against the wish of the Egyptian government because we are there with the consent of the Government, which was a fact. Then perhaps U Thant should have taken the whole problem to the Security Council. Before he gave the order to remove UNEF, he should have gone to the Security Council. But Bunche and Brian thought differently, since this force was put there by the General Assembly not by the Security Council, the legality of it. I was a junior officer, Bunche was the high political advisor. U Thant valued his advice. So his opinion prevailed on this matter. U Thant took the brunt of the whole blame and Brian Urquhart later on in his forward to my book wrote this, which I think for historic reasons, should be noted. These are not my words but Brian Urquhart's words, "U Thant proved a useful scapegoat for the Middle East War in 1967, but it is less often recalled that he was the only world statesman who went to Cairo before the war to reason with President Nasser."

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JK: O.K. I wanted to ask you about that trip. He went to Cairo?

RN: Oh yes.

JK: O.K. And when did he go? Did he go shortly after having received the message from the Government?

RN: No, I'll tell you exactly the message. May 16th was the first message to General Rikhye. Then May 18th U Thant asked Ambassador Gideon Rafael of Israel if UNEF were to be withdrawn from Egypt would Israel accept to station it on the Israeli side. Rafael rejected the idea, out of hand. On May 19th, U Thant reported to the Security Council about the gravity of the situation. On 22nd May we left for Cairo, by Air France to Paris. In Paris the following morning, the 23rd, U Thant was informed at the airport that Nasser closed the Strait of Tiran; that's at Sharm-el-Sheikh. U Thant was good at not showing his emotions, this Buddhist training keeping in his anger and shock, which he never showed. But he asked us, his party plus a few people who were at the airport to greet him, from the French foreign office, and Gibson Parker who was the Head of the UN office in Paris -- to leave him alone. He had to decide whether to proceed to Cairo, or go back. He retired for about five minutes then came back saying that he had decided to go to Cairo. When we went to Cairo, U Thant was very well received there. I want to be very specific on this because it's history right now.

We arrived in Cairo, received warmly by the Egyptian government. They put us up in the Hilton Hotel in Cairo. U Thant talked first with the Foreign Minister. His name was Malunoud Riad and the first thing U Thant asked was that he could not understand why this decision to close Tiran announced on his way to Cairo. It was a legitimate question by U Thant. The Foreign Minister dodged the issue. He said the President will explain all that at dimler. Riad was embarrassed and didn't know what to say. U Thant put to him this proposal: "that Egypt should not take any action in the Gulf, and he would appeal to Israel not to send ships during that period so as to allow time for

discussions.” The Foreign Minister did not commit himself. And in the evening, U Thant was the guest of honor at a dinner given by President Nasser, at his residence. U Thant repeated this proposal and Nasser accepted it, provided Israel would accept it.

JK: Now, the proposal was for?

RN: A quiet period and Egypt should not take any action in the Strait of Tiran. Meanwhile Israel would not send any ships, to test the ban and to allow time for negotiations. Nasser said, “Yes, we accept that provided Israel accepts it.” U Thant again expressed his surprise at the decision to close the Gulf while he was on his way to Cairo, and stressed the seriousness of that act. Nasser explained that the decision had been taken a long time before but he had to announce it prior to U Thant's arrival so that it would not appear as a snub.

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JK: I see. So Nasser had already made the decision long ago. He didn't want it to be linked in some way to U Thant's visit.

RN: It was considered a snub anyway, and Nasser could have waited until U Thant been there and see what he had to say and taken the decision later. But this is exactly what happened. He asked Nasser for his reaction to the moratorium in the Gulf. Nasser accepted provided Israel also complied. And then Nasser expressed his gratitude to UNEF for keeping the peace in the area as a buffer, and gave it the decoration.

JK: O.K. now this is the second tape of the interview with Mr. Ramses Nassif. We were just talking about your trip to Cairo when Nasser had requested the removal of UNEF and you had mentioned to U Thant that he might meet privately with Nasser, is that correct?

RN: No, I had asked, before he had taken his decision to withdraw UNEF, if, and it was his idea, if he had decided to appeal to Nasser to reconsider his decision -- I was all for it. But he, U Thant, mentioned this to the Egyptian ambassador, his name was Mouhamed Elkony, who said he would like to check with Cairo. If you are going to appeal, you appeal directly, without going through bureaucratic channels, as he did in the case of Cuba when he appealed directly to Khrushchev and Kennedy. He didn't go through Stevenson.

JK: So let me make sure I understand this correctly, so he left Cairo then at that point and had gone back to New York.

RN: No, this was before we went to Cairo.

JK: O.K. O.K.

RN: I'm sorry, I'm the one who is creating this confusion. This was before we went to Cairo, this was before he had even decided to withdraw UNEF. He told me that he was thinking of appealing to President Nasser to reconsider his decision to withdraw UNEF from Egypt. I said it was an excellent idea. We were alone, of course. I wouldn't say this in front of anyone else. But when he mentioned it to Ambassador Elkony of Egypt, the Ambassador said he would check with Cairo. And the government said he better not. If he did appeal, they were going to rebuff his appeal, so he decided on the advice of Bunche not to appeal. That's water under the bridge.

JK: O.K. So that was before he'd actually gone to Cairo.

RN: Before. And so he did decide to withdraw UNEF and he went to Cairo. In Cairo he made this proposal to Nasser who accepted provided that Israel would accept.

JK: So actually in this whole process, when was the final decision taken to withdraw UNEF?

RN: The date?

JK: Yes, the date. Was it after he had come back from Cairo?

RN: No, before. He had taken the decision to withdraw before he went.

JK: So, what was the purpose then of the trip to Cairo?

RN: The purpose of the trip to Cairo was to see if he could save the situation from breaking into open hostilities. Especially after the closure of the Strait of Tiran, which was a hostile action and, as you know, war broke out on the 5th of June.

JK: And you had been there in May?

RN: Yes, we came back on May the 25th late at night. And he reported immediately to the Security Council. The Security Council met several times and discussed his report. And the report was gloomy, because he expected something terrible to happen -- it did.

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JK: Now, had the UN peacekeepers actually been withdrawn by the time that the war broke out?

RN: No, when the war broke out, not all of them. In fact there were a few casualties in Gaza and if I remember correctly, a few Indians, four or five or six were killed. But, the complete withdrawal was completed afterwards, after June 5th.

JK: The troop contributing countries basically were in favor of withdrawing?

RN: Yes.

JK: So there was no effort on their part to keep their troops there?

RN: No, there was no effort. The Canadians were reluctant but they didn't try to stay on because if they did the whole thing would be misconstrued as an occupation force. But then again after that there were so many stories about whether Nasser was really serious in making this move. Was it a question of just withdrawing from certain sectors and not the entire force as indicated by the Egyptian General in his initial request to General Rikhye? And a lot of things were said about that and I think there were some things said by Dr. Mahmoud Fawzi, a different Fawzi from the General, who said skeptically that the confusion in Egypt during that fateful decision was described by Dr. Fawzi, the advisor to the President on Foreign Affairs: "as gross miscalculations based on gross misinformation." This sort of typified the mood that was prevailing. Nasser in taking that decision did not consult his Foreign Minister. His Foreign Minister knew about it from U Thant. Because U Thant called in the Egyptian ambassador who got in touch with his Foreign Minister and that's how this whole thing happened. But it is a very long story.

JK: So, this was actually a decision that had been made between Nasser and his Generals. And not involve the Foreign Ministry?

RN: Not the Foreign Minister, not the civilian advisors.

JK: Now I wanted to ask you some questions about Vietnam. Now we're going to another part of the world. Because the Vietnam War was going on during the tenure of U Thant and U Thant was from Asia, from the region. What was U Thant's involvement in the issue with Vietnam?

RN: His involvement was without any mandate. Because neither North Vietnam, nor South Vietnam were members of the United Nations. Nor China for that matter, because the China that was a member was Formosa. The People's Republic of China was seated in October 1971. But his involvement was due to the fact that there was a war going on. He felt very strongly that the war would only be solved through negotiations. He made that declaration so many times at every opportunity, in all his talks with world leaders, including, of course, Washington, London, and Moscow -- he didn't get anywhere. He had very sympathetic response from Ambassador Stevenson. But Stevenson, as you know, was just ambassador to the UN. It is true he was a member of the Cabinet but, Dean Rusk would not cooperate and, in fact, there was a case which was very serious. I know exactly what I am saying. There was a proposal that U Thant received from the North Vietnamese for talks with Washington, that he passed on to Stevenson and Stevenson passed it on to Dean Rusk. Rusk turned it down without referring it to President Johnson. And so U Thant's attempts did not bear fruit. He was frustrated and

he tried so many times. Pope Paul VI visited the UN -- he had a good rapport with U Thant. The Pope addressed the General Assembly -- discussed with U Thant the possibility of uniting the North and the South of Vietnam, as a gesture of good will and peace. And he used U Thant as a sort of go-between, to see if such a visit would be welcome. U Thant used the French. The French gave the message from the Pope to Hanoi. Ho Chi Minh turned it down saying that his government would not be able to secure the safety of the Pope. The Pope did not consider going to the South without going to the North.

JK: So the appeals to U Thant from Vietnam. Who did they come from?

RN: No, they were not appeals. They were messages to be passed on. They came from Hanoi and from the National Liberation Front, the Communists in the South fighting against the government. He tried to keep diplomatic contacts open throughout the war.

JK: And were they a request for the United Nations to be involved?

RN: No, not a request for the UN, because they were not members of the UN, but they requested that he pass on that they were ready to talk. But at that point, the U.S. Government was not interested to enter into any negotiations. They thought they should concentrate on helping preserve the Government in the South and they turned down that initiative. Several attempts were turned down at the level of the Secretary of State, Dean

Rusk at that time, without referring it to the President. We found that out later when it was too late.

JK: Very interesting. I wanted to ask you...

RN: Here perhaps to note that on April 3rd 1968, press dispatchers quoted Hanoi radio as saying that North Vietnam was ready to send a representative to talks to consider an end to the fighting. To keep up the peace momentum, U Thant took this proposal to Washington and suggested Paris, Geneva, Warsaw, as a possible venue for talks. Agreement was eventually reached to begin the peace talks in Paris on May 10, 1968. The talks were protracted and difficult. But five years later, a preliminary agreement was reached with the new administration in Washington, under Nixon. Henry Kissinger headed the US delegation. U Thant, unfortunately, didn't live to see the end of the Vietnam war.

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JK: So tell me something about U Thant as a person, and working with him all those years. And actually could you explain his name?

RN: U is for those who are the first-born. They carry the U. But when he signed papers, he never signed with U Thant, because it was a title, if you like. He would sign Meung Thant.

JK: Is U somewhat similar to Mr.? But it really means first son.

RN: It really is first son, but it could be considered as Mister.

JK: But it can only be used if you're the first son.

RN: Yes, exactly.

JK: And was Thant his family name?

RN: No, Thant was his given name. No family name is used and then when he signed he signed Meung.

JK: And what is Meung?

RN: Meung is small brother. U Thant was an extremely human person. I remember so many instances for example when I arrived in Cairo, during that very critical visit in 1967. I stayed of course, at the Hilton in Cairo where the government put the Secretary-General's party up. My mother was ailing in Heliopolis. It's quite a distance from Cairo. So I asked U Thant if I could use one of the official cars that was put at his disposal, to go and see my mother. He said, by all means. When I came back, that was the first thing he asked me. He said, "How is your mother and how is she feeling and I hope you gave her

my best wishes.” And every morning, on our trips with him, first thing he would ask is, “Did you sleep well? Were you comfortable?” He was extremely human, very quiet but underneath it all he was a very strong person. And again I quote from Brian Urquhart, “in his personal account, as press spokesman, Ramses Nassif has caught the very human and very unusual quality of U Thant's personality. A strong sense of duty, his emphasis on morality and importance of moral behaviour. His extraordinary lack of anger, resentment or envy and his personal kindness and consideration.” [from Urquhart's foreword to my book] And I remember vividly, when U Thant received the bad news that he lost his son, his only son, in a very cruel accident. He fell off a bus in Rangoon. And the following day the son was supposed to come and join his parents in New York and go to college. So it was a horrible story. The reason I had to do this was Bruce Munn, an American journalist who was Chief of the Bureau of UPI at UN Headquarters in New York. When he saw the news in a bulletin on his wire service, he stopped the bulletin and came to me so that I could inform him first because U Thant was in the habit of listening to the news every hour.

JK: So he didn't want him to find out over the radio.

RN: So I went to see him and on my way I said why should I go alone to be the voice of doom so I asked Narasimhan if he would come along with me and he came and we went in. He had a squawk box in the office, which he could switch on to listen to the meetings as well as the news. And he was saying with a big smile, nothing works in the

Secretary-General's office, there he looked at us. We uttered the sad news -- the first thing he said -- I wonder how my wife will take it. He was completely composed. It would be a shock to anybody. His only son. But it was I guess an act of god, that the same year he lost his son, his daughter, his other child, Aye Aye, gave birth to a boy. Apparently, this is very significant in the Buddhist religion, where death takes place with birth.

JK: Yes. Were the major powers pleased with the work that U Thant had carried out?

RN: He had good relations with everybody. He managed to strike a friendship with Khrushchev in 1962. In fact, Khrushchev invited U Thant him to his dacha at Yalta. U Thant got along well with President Kennedy. President Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. With Johnson I think he had a good working relationship. I don't think U Thant and Dean Rusk were on the best of terms. U Thant was a good friend of Stevenson's. There really was a deep friendship with the British, it was Prime Minister Attley of the Labour Government in the 60's. Oh yes, he got along well with de Gaulle. De Gaulle and Hammarskjöld did not get along. De Gaulle used to call the United Nations the disUnited Nations. But at his first meeting in Paris, de Gaulle invited U Thant to a private luncheon and a tête-à-tête without an interpreter -- de Gaulle knew English perfectly since he lived in England during the War. U Thant was not on good terms with the Chinese, the Mainland Chinese -- perhaps because he was friendly with the

representative of China/Formosa of the Republic of China. Yes, I think the answer is yes, he got along well with everybody.

JK: I understand that he was often not feeling well, what was the problem?

RN: He suffered from an ulcer. It was in October 1971, that he fell ill. He was planning a big trip to China after Beijing was seated in the UN. So he was planning to go in November, to crown all the efforts he had made to seat China. This is the one place and one permanent member of the Security Council that he had not had a chance to visit because he couldn't go to Mainland China when Mainland China was not a member. I asked him, "I hope you're including me on this trip, because this is history." He said, "Of course, you're coming. But we need to know how many we are going to be," he said. "You see everyone who comes in says I want to go with you." And I say, "Yes." But that very day he fell in his office and we had to carry him by ambulance to the hospital. He was suffering from ulcer and he stayed in the hospital for six weeks. The Chinese representatives wanted to present their credentials to him. So at that time they were employing someone called Edgar Snow. You might have heard the name; he was a famous writer. If you're interested we can talk about it, if not, we will forget it.

JK: They wanted to present their credentials?

RN: In the hospital. They wouldn't give them to anyone else.

JK: I see, and these were the last few weeks of his tenure as Secretary-General.

RN: Yes.

JK: And they were anxious to become members.

RN: Yes, and the membership issue had been settled on October 25, 1971 they had been seated. But they wanted to present their credentials, personally to him. Which they did at the hospital, and he agreed to receive them there.

JK: And so their ambassador went to the hospital?

RN: To the hospital. The three of them (two representatives and an interpreter) came to the hospital. The Chinese did not want to deal with the Indian Narasimhan, U Thant's Chief de Cabinet. China and India, at that time, were not on the best terms so they used me as a vehicle to make the appointment.

JK: Instead of going through Narasimhan, they went through you?

RN: Yes, they went through me. And, of course, I informed the Chief of Protocol and he didn't like the idea and I said, "Listen they requested to see the Secretary-General and

he wants to do it.” But he said protocol, and I said, “Look, your job is to inform Narasimhan so, by all means inform him.”

JK: And so he saw them in the hospital?

RN: Yes, he saw them in the hospital.

JK: So did he come back to the office?

RN: He came back to the office for a few weeks, but he was weak. At that time there was a move to recruit him for a third term, but of course, it was out of the question.

JK: Out of the question because of his health.

RN: Because of his health. But they really wanted him to consider this offer. And at that time his doctors discovered that he had developed that fatal disease.

JK: What was that disease?

RN: It was cancer.

JK: Oh it was cancer. But he did not ever get to go to China? He did not manage the trip?

RN: He had been to China long before he became Secretary-General. With Prime Minister U Nu to visit China. But he never went to China as Secretary-General.

JK: Well, I just wanted to ask you, just looking back at those years, how would you summarize U Thant's contribution?

RN: Well, I say not as spokesman for anybody, but as myself. I think as of today, Dag Hammarskjöld and U Thant will go down in history as the two greatest Secretaries-General of the United Nations. And I have a very strong feeling that Kofi Anan, the present Secretary-General, after his brilliant and untiring efforts saved Iraq and the Middle East from another bombing or whatever you want to call it, may very well be on his way. But it is too early to pass any judgment. The argument Secretary-General Anan negotiated with Baghdad on arms inspection was a great achievement.

JK: And what was the quality of U Thant that made him a really good Secretary-General? Or what kinds of quality do you think that office requires?

RN: I think his sense of integrity, honesty, spiritual outlook and good person, and good judgment. He had all that.

JK: And people had confidence in him?

RN: People had confidence in him. A lot of people had confidence in him.

JK: How was he as an administrator? Because originally the position as Secretary-General was intended to be an administrator.

RN: As an administrator he was not that good. He left everything in the hands of C.V. Narasimhan. I think that was the black spot, that was his weakness, I wouldn't call it black spot. That was his weakness. Administration, U Thant gave a lot of authority to Narasimhan. This is not a weakness that Dag Hammarskjöld had. He was interested in management but delegated authority. He gave a lot to Andrew Cordier who was his Executive Assistant.

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JK: Well, is there anything else that you would particularly like to add that we somehow did not cover?

RN: No we covered a lot, pretty thorough.

JK: Well, thank you so much.

RN: It was my pleasure.



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Yale-UN Oral History Project

Rallises Nassif

Jean Krasno, Interviewer

March 9, 1998

Geneva, Switzerland

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United Nations Oral History Project

**Ramses Nassif
14 April 2005**

Yale-UN Oral History Interview
Ramses Nassif
April 15, 2005
New York City
Interviewer: Jean Krasno

Jean Krasno: This is an interview with Ramses Nassif who was the spokesman for Secretary-General U Thant. My name is Jean Krasno and we are doing the interview in New York City on April 15, 2005. It is a great pleasure to see you again and I know that we had our meeting in Geneva. I would just like to tell people who might be reading this transcript that there is also an earlier transcript interview with you. This is to follow up on that because you are here for a meeting that was held yesterday by the current spokesman, Fred Eckhard, to bring all the former spokesmen together and to have an interchange of thoughts and ideas and your experiences. I was able to be in on that meeting somewhat and heard some of your comments earlier. I wanted to follow up a little bit on that.

But just to establish who you are, when did you first join the UN and when did you first meet U Thant?

Ramses Nassif: I joined the UN in July 1953, and by coincidence it was the year that Dag Hammarskjöld was elected and appointed Secretary-General to succeed Trygve Lie after the resignation of Mr. Lie. I joined the UN as an information officer in charge of promoting the UN publications and then in 1955 after the Bandung conference in Indonesia which was attended by many non-aligned countries. The ambassadors of some of those countries were eminent at the United Nations, in fact, U Thant was one of them. There were a couple of others. There was Prince Ali Khan, ambassador of Pakistan; there was Ambassador Omar Lutfi of Egypt, and Ambassador Adnan Pachachi of Iraq who is now one of the leaders of Iraq after the US invasion.

JK: That meeting was the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement.

RN: Absolutely. In 1955, in Bandung, it was attended by Tito, Nehru, and Nasser and several other leaders, including Sukarno of Indonesia. So, I met U Thant as ambassador of Burma to the UN in 1957 -- we shared a close friend -- Omar Lutfi of Egypt. That is how I got to know U Thant and then we would meet from time-to-time for lunch or dinner and chat about the UN. When he was elected and appointed by the General Assembly as Acting Secretary-General on the third of November 1961, I was available as somebody already in the Secretariat who knew him. And he knew me. In fact, the appointment of U Thant was a Friday afternoon and I was the first one to break the news to him because our friend Omar Lutfi was the president of the Security Council. So, when he came out of the Council, before he spoke to the press, Lutfi took me aside to say, "It is our friend U Thant, unanimous decision."

So, I went the delegates' lounge looking for U Thant. I found him and I said breathlessly, "Heartiest congratulations." We shook hands and he said with a smile, "I hope your

source is a good one." That was his way; he always had a smile and he always had a pleasant comment.

JK: He had served as the president of the General Assembly.

RN: No, he had served as vice president.

JK: Had you known him during that period?

RN: Yes, I have to look up the exact year. There is a picture in my book of U Thant and Hammarskjöld sitting next to each other because as vice president, presiding over the General Assembly, the Secretary-General sat on his right. On his left was Andrew Cordier who was in charge of General Assembly Affairs. I knew him then, yes.

JK: What had been his relationship with member states when he was vice president of the General Assembly.

RN: He was vice president of the General Assembly and he presided over one of the meetings because the president was absent. He was never president of the General Assembly.

JK: I have seen that photograph many times.

RN: He was indeed presiding over that meeting because the president was absent -- I don't remember who the president was -- and Hammarskjöld was sitting next to him. So he was the vice president in charge of that meeting, but he was not president of the General Assembly. I am positive about that.

JK: What was his relationship like with the members?

RN: He was popular. He was very popular certainly among members of the Asian-African Group which was established after the Bandung conferences. U Thant was one of their prominent members. He was the chairman of a permanent committee formed to monitor the Algerian problem. Algeria was agitating; there was an anti-colonial war there and this was a sort of formal support of the Algerian people in their struggle against French occupation. That really made U Thant popular with the front of the liberation of Algeria that had representatives at the UN. I remember in 1964, after the independence of Algeria, he made an official visit as Secretary-General to Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, in that order. When he arrived at Algiers the president of Algeria, Ben Bella, was there personally with all members of his cabinet. U Thant reviewed the military honor guard at the airport and there was a 21-gun salute. Never before in history -- there were three Secretaries-General by that time: Trygve Lie, Hammarskjöld, and now U Thant -- never before had this happened to a Secretary-General.

JK: So, he was very well respected and honored.

RN: And that was the Algerians' way of saying, "Thank you for all your efforts when we know we were still struggling for our independence." Then he was invited as the first foreigner to address their national assembly in Algiers, which again was a recognition of what he did for the Algerian cause.

JK: When he was elected as acting Secretary-General, what was U Thant's position at that time? Was he ambassador?

RN: When he was first elected, yes. He came from the mission; he was the ambassador of Burma.

JK: How did you become his spokesman?

RN: I will tell you exactly what happened. That was November the third 1961, when he was elected by the Security Council and approved by the General Assembly, on a Friday, the same day. This was an emergency, after the sudden death of Dag Hammarskjöld. There was a lot of confusion throughout the Secretariat. The place was rudderless without a leader. So, immediately after the Security Council decision which was unanimous, the Assembly met and approved the appointment. That was the third of November. The following day was a Saturday, the fourth. I decided on my own. I heard from his private secretary at the mission that he was planning to come to the office. It was his first day; his first appointment was with me.

I waited for him in the lobby because I knew there was a persistent and charming, inquisitive reporter called Bill Otis of the Associated Press. He made it his business to wait for the Secretary-General when he comes in, as he is coming into the building, getting out of his car, to ask him a few questions. I knew Bill would be there. It wasn't just Bill, but a few others as well, correspondents. U Thant chatted with them as usual and then he looked at me and said, "Will you come? I want to see you; will you come with me?"

I did. I entered his office and there was at that time still the secretary of the late Dag Hammarskjöld sitting in her usual place. After he walked into his office -- her name was Hannah Platz -- she looked at me and she knew me. She said, "Ramses, do you have an appointment?" I said, "Yes, Miss Platz, the Secretary-General asked me to come." I went in and he kept me for an hour and fifteen minutes, asking specific questions about how Hammarskjöld dealt with the press, the press conferences, who organized them, how were they conducted. He was very articulate and meticulous in his questions related to the press because he was very fond of the press. And he knew some of the correspondents. I answered all these to the best of my knowledge. The General Assembly was in session (the usual session because we were in November), he wanted to give a press conference in a week or so, which he did, actually on the first of December. This was despite the fact that traditionally the Secretary-General did not give a press conference during the session of the General Assembly. But he said, "Since I am just taking over now, I would like to do it." And I said, "Yes, I think it is a good idea because they are anxious to meet with you." He said, "I would like to give also some private

luncheons on the 38th floor for the correspondents, a small group of ten or twelve each time, once a month." I said, "Of course, it has not been done before, but if you want to do it, why not?"

JK: There were a number of first things happening. This was the first time that a Secretary-General would have invited members of the press to a private luncheon.

RN: Yes, and I will come to that in a minute, apart from the lunches. As I was walking out he said, "Ramses." He always called me by my first name. "Ramses, would you like to be my press officer?" I said, "Sir, I would be honored and privileged." He said nothing and I walked out. And there were three or four people waiting to see him, including C. V. Narasimhan, who had been appointed by Hammarskjöld as his chief of cabinet before Hammarskjöld's departure to that ill fated trip where he met his death. He had assumed that he still had the same post that he was in, because nobody had changed him or fired him, or put anyone in above him. There were a few others who looked me up and down, a normal reaction, because I did not know any of them. I knew who Narasimhan was but I had never met him personally and that was after his appointment and there was this confusion that followed Hammarskjöld's death. So, there was no reason to meet with him or to see him and my contact in my job was Andrew Cordier who was still the Executive Assistant to the Secretary-General, to Dag Hammarskjöld.

JK: Just let me back up a minute. At that time, you were with DPI?

RN: Yes, I was with DPI. My title was Liaison Officer with the Asian-African Group. Also, I had a temporary assignment as assistant to George Ivan Smith who was the spokesman for Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld. He was Director of Information in London brought by Dag Hammarskjöld because Wilder Foote who was the spokesman and the head of press had had a heart attack. But George Ivan was away on a personal trip. That is why he did not accompany Dag Hammarskjöld; otherwise he would have been with him on that flight that crashed.

JK: It came out in the meeting yesterday that this was the first time the UN had had a spokesman for the Secretary-General.

RN: Correct, this happened about two weeks after. His press conference was December first, same year, 1961. It must have been about a week later, on a Friday afternoon, he received a complaint from UNCA, the UN Correspondents Association. The president of UNCA wrote a letter of complaint, saying that they wanted to track a story the night before relating to the Security Council and they could not find a single press officer at 6:15 to check it for them. So, he summoned me to his office; showed me the letter and said, "I want to call a meeting of the head of OPI (Office of Public Information -- OPI then changed later to DPI) who was a Mr. Tevares Desa, a Brazilian and the directors of the various divisions. He said, "Call them and ask them to come to my conference room tomorrow at 10 o'clock. I said, "Don't you think that it would be better if your office called the meeting?" He said, "No, I want you to do it." That did not make me popular at all, because I called these people to come to a meeting with the Secretary-General on a

Saturday morning. Not a single one of them ever saw the UN building on a Saturday because that would interfere with their weekends. Some of them questioned me. I said, "I am calling on the instructions of the Secretary-General." And somebody said, "Why you?" And I said, "Maybe you should ask the Secretary-General," and I hung up. They were giving me a hard time. I was young and bold and I thought, let the S-G take care of me.

But they all came. He started the meeting reading from notes he himself had prepared; then he said, "as of this coming Monday, there will be a press briefing at noon, conducted by Osgood Caruthers." He was the UN spokesman appointed by Hammarskjöld before his death. "And my press officer, Ramses Nassif." That is when he gave me that title officially. So, it was the first time he really used that terminology in front of this group. But OPI resisted, calling me spokesman for the Secretary-General or calling Osgood Caruthers spokesman for the UN. And so it was, without any bureaucratic recognition. That is how the regular press briefing came into being and became part of life at the UN today.

Before that, under Trygve Lie, and under Hammarskjöld the press briefings were an event. And when there was something to be announced, they would call together the press on the loud speaker together at the bull-pen and then they would brief them on what was happening. But a regular press briefing, Monday through Friday, was started by U Thant. And he even directed something else. We have this expression "to put the lid on" at the end of the day when all meetings are over so that the correspondents who are still hanging around can go home. He said, "You do not put the lid on unless the officer in charge of that evening calls the Office of the Secretary-General and they are going to check with me before you put the lid on."

JK: "Putting the lid on," what exactly do you mean?

RN: It means nothing is happening; you can go home. It is strictly for the correspondents. Because some of them are agencies and they would like to hang around in case something happened. If the lid is on, nothing is happening.

JK: What was the response of the press to U Thant? Did they like him?

RN: They liked him very much. He had a very warm relationship with the press. He felt very comfortable giving a press conference. You could see that he reacted warmly no matter how difficult or how delicate the questions were, he handled them very well. The first time he gave a press conference, the one on the first of December 1961, he greeted them, "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen of the fourth state." And then he said how much he relied on them to publicize the positive work of the United Nations, to criticize what they don't see fit, provided it is constructive criticism. And then he started those luncheons. We had three of them. They were in January, February, and March, 1962. They went very well, but then everybody got into the act. The OPI wanted to have a meeting to discuss this. When I mentioned it to him, he said, "Please tell them that it is none of their business. These are my lunches. I am the only person to decide who should

come. You give me your list and I decide. They are my guests." If you are inviting me to your house and you are paying for my meal, nobody has any right to question you; this is your business.

I must say that some of the correspondents appreciated it and others were trying to turn it into a mini-press conference, things that he said off the record leaked. It was getting a little bit messy. So, he decided that he gave the first three and we had invited perhaps the most important ones first and he said, "We will do away with that. Just explain quietly that I am too busy with other problems. But I will give a small reception for the president of UNCA, the Correspondents Association, and his committee whenever he is elected and at the end of the year I will give a big press reception for all the press." He carried that on for the next ten years that he was Secretary-General. And we did away with the luncheons.

JK: Were there times that the press was critical?

RN: Oh yes. That was 1967 after the withdrawal of UNEF. They were critical because they blamed him for what they considered his hastiness in withdrawing UNEF. They thought that perhaps he should have referred the matter to the Security Council. Entrenous, I thought that perhaps it would have been a good idea to protect him from taking such a major decision, but I was a junior person and other people on his staff advised him not to do it, not to go to the Security Council on the legality, the very narrow legal point, that the force was created by the General Assembly as a result of the resolution by the emergency session of the General Assembly that met in 1956, because the Security Council could not act. The British, the French and the Israelis, after the invasion of Egypt, the British and the French used the veto. They used the veto against a US proposal. Because Eisenhower was against what they did and it was a very curious thing that the French and British vetoed an American resolution introduced by Henry Cabot Lodge at the time.

So, he didn't do that and he withdrew UNEF. But everyone seemed to forget as Brian Urquhart said the other day, that U Thant was the only statesman who opted on his own to go to Cairo to reason with President Nasser against Nasser's decision to withdraw UNEF. And Nasser did not, unfortunately, listen. That was the time and the only time that he received a lot of flack, in my opinion unjustly, because he had no choice. UNEF was placed there with the consent of the Egyptian government.

JK: How did you and U Thant respond to that criticism?

RN: There was a lot of criticism. At the time, Bill Powell was around. We decided that we could not cope with the barrage. And let's face it, quite a bit of it was inspired and pushed by the Israelis who didn't like that decision and the US too was quite critical. So, we asked U Thant if he would ask Ralph Bunche, who was the top man on the Middle East, to come down and talk to the press, which he did. He did his best. But that campaign continued for some time. Then, of course, it was followed by the June war between Israel and Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. Everybody got into it. It was a very

difficult period. Gradually, this started to disappear because they realized that it wasn't just the withdrawal. In fact, U Thant offered this force to be put on the Israeli side of the border and the Israelis said, "No, we will have nothing to do with that." A lot of other elements began to appear. He did what he had to do because you could not keep a UN peace force in a country that didn't want them. Otherwise, it becomes an occupation force. We survived that, somehow.

JK: One of the strategies that he used, if I understand correctly, was for U Thant to not always take all the criticism from the press but he would send Ralph Bunche.

RN: No, Ralph Bunche came to rescue his spokesman and the UN spokesman. U Thant defended himself in the General Assembly and Security Council. But when it came to the press, we really couldn't handle the barrage of criticism. So, we asked and Bunche came willingly. Because he knew more about this whole intricate thing than either Bill or myself.

JK: So, Bunche came to talk to the press at the noon briefing.

RN: Yes, at the noon briefing, to answer some of their questions and rebut some of their criticisms. He was forceful, a very tough cookie and he knew what to say.

JK: Did U Thant come to the noon briefings?

RN: No, he did not because he gave over 100 press conferences and press briefings during his ten-year tenure. They were not all at headquarters, everywhere he went, from Moscow, to Kiev, to Delhi, to Kathmandu. He never hesitated. Sylvana Foa, who was Boutros-Ghali's outspoken spokeswoman, said yesterday that he gave only one press conference. That is what she said. And she added that it was a miserable press conference. That is what Sylvana said; I wasn't there. It was a miserable press conference because he didn't like to give press conferences. One in five years is surprising.

JK: During the time of U Thant, we didn't have internet and other kinds of communications we have today. So, predominantly what was the media in U Thant's time?

RN: We had television and newspapers. There was no internet. It was the printed word and he gave several TV interviews. He used also, once a year, to invite the publisher and editorial board of the *New York Times* to a private luncheon on the 38th floor in his dining room. And they would reciprocate by doing the same. We did that with the *New York Times* and *Time Magazine* on a regular basis because he was quite friendly with Henry Luce at the time. That was in the 1960s. When Henry Luce passed away in the late 1960s that faded, the luncheons with *Time* and the UN. His successors did not follow that tradition.

JK: The press conferences, were they televised?

RN: Oh yes, they were televised by UN television and then the networks would pick what they wanted. There was a famous woman, Pauline Frederick, of NBC. She was a prominent TV correspondent and she was very fond of U Thant, very fond of the UN. She was president of the UNCA correspondents association. She used to interview him from time to time and carry him on NBC, on her program. We had a very good share of press coverage during those ten years, thanks to him and his personality, and his availability to the press.

JK: Dick Hottel was saying yesterday that in the first two decades of the UN that there was still a general appreciation of the UN worldwide after its creation, and that had carried through. So, did that play into the more positive reaction of the press?

RN: Yes, plus the fact that the man at the helm was genuinely fond of the press and he went out of his way to accommodate the press. He was the only Secretary-General that I know of, even after my time because I checked that with the others yesterday, that visited the correspondents in their small offices in the Secretariat. He would call me and say, "Ramses, I have about 15 or 20 minutes, would you accompany me because you know where they are exactly. I would like to drop in to say hello."

JK: He would go from the 38th floor down to the 3rd floor?

RN: It was the 4th, 3rd, and 2nd floors at that time that they had their offices. And you can imagine, Mike Littlejohn was busy on his typewriter and somebody knocking at his door and saying, "May I come in? Do you have a minute?" He would think, oh my God, it's the Secretary-General. And he would pull up a chair. And it was really genuine. He had nothing to ask of them, no favors or anything like that. I must say, I used his popularity in doing something quite interesting. It was my own innovation. I have never discussed this with anybody, but I will discuss it with you for the record. Before the press conference I would make a point of seeing *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Reuters*, *AP*, *UPI*, *TASS*, *AFP*, all the important news media. I knew all the correspondents personally. I would go say, "Michael, what do you intend to ask about tomorrow?" It might be Cyprus, or Congo, or something like that. At the end of the day before the press conference on the following day, I would sit down and very briefly write down the issues and give it to him by hand and say, "Your homework." Sure enough, those issues came up.

JK: You had this preparation and that is extremely important.

RN: At least I alerted him to what they were interested in. In fact, sometimes he would make a lot of news, bombshells, at those press conferences. I remember vividly in 1964, he was on an official visit to Ottawa, Canada, at the invitation of Paul Martin. He was the foreign minister and is the father of Paul Martin, the prime minister of Canada today. There was a press conference and a question came from an American, *The New York Times* correspondent. There was a Senator Barry Goldwater who had suggested, "Let's use the atom bomb and bomb the Vietnamese into the stone age," something like that, a

really wild statement, coming from a Senator. So, they wanted to have U Thant's reaction. I can quote his reaction verbatim; he said, "Yes, I have heard about this and in my opinion, anybody who advocates the use of atomic or nuclear weapons anywhere at anytime is out of his mind."

And Paul Martin was sitting next to him and he pounded the table shouting, "Here, here, here." Encouraged by this, U Thant, God bless his soul, went on and brought in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and how people in Asia said, rightly or wrongly, that it was used there because the Japanese were a different race. In fact, he injected the racial element. These weapons were not use against Germany. It is a fact. This was on the front page of the *New York Times*. I personally expected and I told him at that time, I said, "S-G, I am afraid that this Goldwater is going to get back to us, to blast us." He shook his head and said, "Yes, we'll see." Perhaps Goldwater thought better of it; but anyway, nothing happened -- no reaction.

JK: That brings me to another topic that came up yesterday regarding the Vietnam War. Did U Thant feel that there were aspects of that war that were racist?

RN: No, he thought the Vietnam War, and he said it so many times, was cruel, senseless, bloody, and it would never be solved through military means, and it never was, in fact. He came up with so many formulas that through his good friend Adlai Stevenson -- he was very close to Adlai Stevenson -- passed on to Washington. U Thant told me that this stopped at Secretary of State Dean Rusk's desk. He never passed them on to President Johnson, for some reason or other. I remember, it was San Francisco, the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations at the Opera House and Johnson was there. He made a speech in which he hinted that he would like the UN to be involved and then he and U Thant met. At the time, I was there following this. And the president invited U Thant in. There was Ralph Bunche and Dean Rusk and a couple of others who were not invited. U Thant and Johnson met for a whole hour. We were told that the subject was Vietnam. The pity is that in spite of all his efforts, U Thant was really obsessed by this cruel war. Being an Asian and a Buddhist, it was against his whole philosophy and religion. He didn't live to see the end of it because it was 1975 when it ended. And it was solved by peaceful means, by negotiation.

JK: What were the things that he had done to try to find a solution?

RN: He had a formula to stop the bombing and I cannot try to summarize because there are several pages in my book on this. But to stop the bombing, a cease-fire, and then informal talks. He even came up with a venue for the talks and he had sent messages to Hanoi, to the Viet Cong who were fighting in the south. He got positive responses, but it stopped there. Nothing happened, and U Thant died in November 1974. He did not live to see the end of this war in the manner that he had proposed.

JK: Now was Vietnam a member of the United Nations?

RN: No, that's why he could not follow it up in his official capacity. He was doing all that as a sideline. Neither Vietnam nor Beijing, because it was Formosa that was a member of the United Nations. Beijing was seated in October 1971, his last year as Secretary-General. And there is a very interesting episode there and I will conclude with that. When Beijing was seated and Formosa was ousted -- we cannot say China because China was a founding member of the UN -- we can say Communist China, the People's Republic of China, sent a delegation here. They had employed a distinguished American by the name of Edgar Snow, who had written a book about China. He was working as a press liaison. U Thant had unfortunately gotten sick in the office and was taken to the hospital for treatment. Edgar Snow called me to say the delegation has arrived in New York. "They would like to present their credentials to the Secretary-General in person. They did not want to go through C.V. Narasimhan, who was the Chef de Cabinet. At the time, Chinese/Indian relations were not friendly, not good at all. But they want to do it personally to the Secretary-General. "Would you be kind enough to pass this message?" I did; I called Don Thomas, his security man next door because I did not want to disturb him in his hospital room. I said, "Would you pass this on to the S-G and let me know?" The answer came within ten or fifteen minutes, "Yes, it's fine, anytime," on such and such a date.

JK: He had to get out of the hospital and get back to his office.

RN: No, no, at the hospital.

JK: He received Beijing's papers at the hospital?

RN: The credentials, at the hospital. It was covered on television. And I had to make a statement about it. Meanwhile, and to cover myself, I called the chief of protocol to tell him about this. And he blew his top. He was a Turk. I said, "Listen, Sinan, the S-G has approved, so don't give me this blah, blah. The S-G has approved, so if you want to cover your wings, just inform C.V. that it is going to happen. He said, "What about you?" And I said, "Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself." He said, "Oh, the Secretary-General will not receive the credentials in his hospital bed; this is ridiculous." But he did; it took place. I made a statement that was carried on TV and the TV people were courteous. I said, "You don't want to disturb a man who is not well in his hospital room. I promise you, I will come back; I'll get you a statement in his name as his spokesman and give you all the details, and names and everything." They agreed. China was a big thing at the time, Red China, Communist China.

This has been a great pleasure and I hope you liked what we achieved this morning.

JK: Thank you, it was fantastic.

RN: Thank you.