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Interview with Barbara Crossette

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Interviewer: Jean Krasno

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BARBARA CROSSETTE

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INTERVIEWER-JEAN KRASNO

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April 28, 2005
New York, New York
Interviewee: Jean Krasno

Jean Krasno: This is an interview with Barbara Crossette [former Bureau Chief of the *New York Times*] on Thursday, April 28, 2005 at the United Nations in New York. First of all, thank you very much for participating in the Oral History of the United Nations. When did you first begin to cover the UN? And what were the issues at that particular time?

Barbara Crossette: I always say I covered the UN in two phases. The first was when I was out in Asia as a correspondent. I first went to Southeast Asia when there were still refugees, boat people, and camps along the Thai/Cambodian border. In Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, there were still a lot of people who had not found resettlement or didn't want to go home. So, I first got to know the UN in the field; the World Food Programme, I could recognize its flag; UNHCR, obviously, and the way it worked so well with all the other attendant private voluntary agencies, like the International Rescue Committee, and so on. That was a different UN.

I was on the Pakistan/Afghanistan border later on and there again I got to know quite a few people from the UN, people working in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Then in 1994, after doing some other things, I came back to New York and I was a correspondent at UN headquarters from 1994 till 2001. I was the *New York Times* Bureau Chief, though I always say that meant not much; there were only me and my researcher.

JK: When you were writing in Southeast Asia, were you also writing for the *New York Times*?

BC: Yes, I was Bureau Chief in Bangkok for four years. Then I was Bureau Chief in Delhi for another three years. And those were years when there was still quite a lot of UN activity in Asia and also quite a lot of turmoil, civil wars and the Soviet period in Afghanistan. In Southeast Asia there were still huge refugee camps that the UN was dealing with: Lao, Burmese, Cambodian, certainly Vietnamese boat people.

JK: That actually covered previous Secretaries-General. How many different Secretaries-General were you covering during the period?

BC: I had met everybody back to Waldheim but I never reported on him. I met him at a conference in Vienna after he had gone and he was having trouble with his American visa or lack of an American visa. I knew him only after he was out of the UN system. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, I traveled with once to Hanoi. Someone mentioned at a spokesmen's reunion [in April 2005] that Pérez de Cuéllar has not been credited adequately for foreseeing the end of the Cold War and for trying to get into areas of regional crises or other unresolved problems. And in retrospect, that is exactly what he was doing in

Southeast Asia. It was in the mid-1980s; it was when Vietnam was trying to open to the outside world but not wanting to change its system economically or politically. The US and Vietnam were not able to come to terms on how to open some sort of negotiations. It was the time of the prisoners of war and missing in action [POW-MIA] hearings in Washington. There was a lot of tension around that issue. Pérez de Cuéllar went to North Vietnam to talk to Hanoi. He saw possibilities, not so much in the big relationship between the Soviet Union and the US because no one at that point would have predicted the fall of the Soviet Union, or not very many people, but in regional areas where there had been proxy wars. There had been tensions that were fostered by the competition between the Soviet Union or China and the US or the West. He went to Hanoi to talk about a number of things but I went with him on that trip from Bangkok because of Vietnam. I didn't know him very well beyond that.

Boutros Boutros-Ghali I knew quite well because he was Secretary-General when I came to UN headquarters in 1994. I learned a lot from him. I admired him; he was very difficult with journalists, but he was very honest about it. I traveled with him to Africa at one point to visit Rwanda, Burundi, and Angola. We also went to Addis, actually. He was very knowledgeable about Africa from a scholarly, academic, historical point of view. I always had trouble getting the *Times* to let me do any traveling. I had tried to persuade the *New York Times* to allow people to travel because a lot of the tangible work of the UN was done outside the headquarters and that was the only way to get a handle on how it worked. Editors would say, "Well, we have a correspondent there," or "We can't afford it." So, on this trip to Africa with Boutros-Ghali, I wanted to make the point to the foreign desk that this was a very good way first of all to get to know him – it was a small plane – there were only two of us on the plane from the press. Michael Ignatieff, who was then working on a BBC documentary and later wrote a beautiful piece about Boutros, was also there.

So I said to the secretary general one day when we were flying from someplace to another, "Would you please say something; make news, so I can justify this trip." And he said to me (which is an illustration of what I said about his being honest about his relations with the media) "That's not my job. If I go around making news, I am not going to get anything done because all the people I talk to trust me not to say anything." He was perfectly cheerful about it. Having said that, he didn't keep us out of anything. We went into meetings with him. I got to see him lecturing the Rwandan government for some shortcoming. They had crowded prisons; there were lots of things that were going on. It was just a year after the genocide. It was a pretty horrific trip for him because he did not cut it short to go back to Bosnia when Srebrenica fell. He was pilloried in the United States for this, one of the things he felt was the beginning of the end for him.

He didn't like the press. He didn't really want to be at news conferences. He didn't want to say anything about what he was doing. But he was very inclusive. When he agreed to bring somebody with him, you had access to almost everything he had access to. So, it was very interesting and useful to me. I valued his intelligence a lot. He became a bit of a cynical philosopher about the UN. He didn't much like NGOs either. Now I see him saying from his retirement in Paris that NGOs have a very useful function. But at the UN

he just didn't like too much going on that he wasn't in charge of. The press was something out there doing things on its own.. And the NGOs were doing things. He felt that all of this was kind of disruptive of the work of the Organization in some ways. But a very smart man with a lot of sense of realism about the world.

JK: In a certain way, he would not be media-friendly.

BC: He certainly was not.

JK: What about Pérez de Cuéllar? Maybe you didn't know him as well.

BC: No, once again, there were just a couple of us on his trip and again in a small plane, too, to Hanoi from Bangkok. He was much more formal. Boutros-Ghali was also formal in an old fashioned kind of courtly way. But Boutros-Ghali is often not known for what he did for women in the Egyptian foreign ministry. He promoted women to good positions, among them Mervat Tallawy, who is now the head of ESCWA, the Economic and Social Commission for West Asia, a brilliant woman who literally fought her way into the foreign ministry in Egypt. And it was not until she came under his tutelage that she began to be propelled into higher and higher jobs. But he was never media friendly.

JK: But you are giving him credit for his role in women's issues.

BC: Boutros-Ghali may not have been interested in women because he was sympathetic to feminism, but he recognized talented women and he gave them space. Pérez de Cuéllar, I have heard, was very courtly in general but not particularly interested in the social problems that came to dominate the 1990s through the big conferences on social issues. He was perfectly nice, but he kept us in the media completely at arm's length. On the trip to Hanoi he had a briefing for us on the plane on the way back to Bangkok, but really didn't give away anything. I have been told by others that he treated the press as a necessary nuisance, or even a necessary evil, but wasn't too keen on it.

This raises a larger question. You talk about why can't the UN make itself better known for what it does. It has often been the case that the Secretaries-General have been traditionally, I gather, except maybe going back to U Thant, whom I didn't know, reclusive. Hammarskjöld was always described as reclusive. They distanced themselves from what we call now public diplomacy.

JK: Before we get into the Kofi Annan era, in these earlier times we talked about the Secretary-General being media-friendly; what about the media toward the UN? Was the media generally friendly toward the UN? Was there a negativity in the earlier years?

BC: In the earlier years, I don't know since I don't go back to the really early years.

JK: In the 1980s and 1990s?

BC: I think the media has to be divided. I think a lot of the media then and still now suffer from an extreme ignorance of the United Nations. Part of the problem is that what are now fashionably known as gate-keepers-- publishers, high-ranking editors -- really do have not much involvement with the multilateral system. It used to be at the *New York Times*, for example, that to be a foreign correspondent was your way to the top. You had to have an international view. That ceased in the 1990s. Although the *Times* is now back with an internationally experienced executive editor, when the *Times* went through its worst period under Howell Raines, he had really no feeling for what the United Nations was or what it did. This was true for quite a lot of the newspapers. So, if in the big media organizations there is interest in the UN, a correspondent is constantly fighting for space. What happens is that the UN becomes a stage setting only when a big American issue comes here. And this is becoming more so, I am sorry to say, in recent years. I think there has been almost nothing but 'inside the beltway' reporting on international affairs by the American media.

The UN is grossly neglected as a source of excellent information. I have just been lecturing around Brazil, and when I am asked questions about why the American media didn't report more vigorously on the weapons of mass destruction issue before the war in Iraq in early 2003, I say: "It isn't that they are being ordered around by the White House; reporters just weren't doing their jobs." The UN sat here on tons of archives about Iraq and they knew exactly what Saddam had or didn't. No one here trusted Saddam Hussein any more than President Bush did. But the fact is that American journalists didn't really make use of what balancing expertise was here. And the UN didn't put it out front. Here in New York you have such a wonderful diplomatic corps and even it's neglected. I think there is a big gap between the big media and the UN. Then there is a second gap between the correspondents at the UN and the ones in the field because there isn't enough exchange of information, so that the UN would get also noticed doing things abroad.

There are exceptions. Somini Sen Gupta, as the former *Times*' correspondent in West Africa, did quite a lot of reporting with UNHCR. It helped bring the story to life, of Liberia in particular. I think the same thing is happening to some degree in Darfur.

JK: As long as we have jumped to that particular question, the media not being prepared to cover the UN, from the UN's point of view, what have been the shortcomings as far as the UN is concerned in approaching the media, in general? The UN and then the Secretary-General specifically?

BC: The UN has a problem. If you look at the media based in the headquarters here, it is like nothing else. It is not the coherent state department press corps; it's not the White House press corps. Even to some degree the World Bank and the IMF, you get people with an economics background. At the UN it's an international group of people that is very disparate. Some people especially during the Cold War were, I don't want to use the word "spies," but they were beholden to national news agencies to one degree or another, government controlled and doing government work. Some people here are using press passes as a kind of sinecure. They get a free office. They may be doing business on the side. You get, I would say, fewer than a dozen correspondents here who are really

covering the United Nations and what it does, and international affairs in general, using the United Nations as a base.

For the spokesman's office and for the Organization, this is a very difficult animal to handle because you can have briefings and news conferences, but the minute an official tries to say, "Let's take these five correspondents and put up some sort of special briefing or meeting," you get a huge outcry from everybody else. "Why are you talking to the New York Times? Why are you not talking to us? What are we, second-rate, third world?" And when the news people themselves try to create some sort of functioning organ of the news representatives here, we have the same problem. We tried for a while, five or six big organizations, to have lunches for important ambassadors, the Russian ambassador, then Sergey Lavrov, or Madeleine Albright. We would say anyone can come – we put up a sign – but we had to each contribute twenty dollars. Some journalists would say, "I can't afford it, and this is elitism and you are a clique and we don't want anything to do with it." It can be very difficult to develop the kind of working relationship with UN officials and the diplomatic corps that works in other places.

Where the UN has failed often is not being preemptive with information. I mentioned the weapons of mass destruction earlier. I was in Cambodia, at the University of Phnom Penh doing workshops for Asian journalists in 2003, and so I wasn't here in the immediate weeks before the war, but from what I could see on television there was a certain amount of discussion about Iraqi weapons but the UN was not in there right away. This was partly because in the Bush administration, particularly some people in the defense department, were belittling Hans Blix. He was still head of UNMOVIC [the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission]. If you read his book *Disarming Iraq*, you see how much he knew and how hurt he often was by the treatment he got in Washington, even by some journalists. He was belittled, so he was diminished. Now if the UN could have said, "We could have a big briefing in Washington and we are going to tell you what the UN knows about Saddam, and these are the questions, and these are the things we don't think he has anymore, though he may be trying to get them back" it would have been a beautiful balance to what American journalists were getting, but it didn't happen. Or at least, it didn't happen in any large-scale way.

JK: And they could have used at that time David Kay or Charles Duelfer or others who would have been good as they used them after the war.

BC: Exactly. Those who went and basically wrote reports that they could have written had they still been here [at the UN]. But the UN got a little bit sore, I think. The UN got like a wounded animal because it had been attacked enough. In the Secretariat there was a group, not in the sense of an organized group, but there were people who simply thought, "We are not going to deal with the Americans; we're not going to seek them out; we're not help them; it's a hopeless cause." One can also argue that the Secretary-General Kofi Annan took too long on the oil-for-food scandal to get a preemptive story out there also. I think he was blindsided by his son [accused on conflict of interest]

which is a terrible shame because the eyes of the media went off the main story onto the peripheral story.

On the Iraqi oil industry, on dealing with Iraq generally, UN people have a world of knowledge about how hard it is going to be to create a government in Iraq, how hard it is going to be to deal with Iraqis, with no political culture. They were all raised under the era of smuggling and terror under Saddam. What do they know of politics? As the Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari recently said, "Security meant security of the regime; it didn't mean security of the people." So, we have to start again. For the human understanding of Iraq, had the US cared to find out what to expect, here again the UN just doesn't get out there fast enough.

Now to be fair, when I say this at the UN, people reply that that go and practically beg for coverage, especially under this Secretary-General who is so engaging and willing to do this. They say television talk shows are just not interested.

JK: Are there constraints by the Member States that somehow DPI or the UN itself feels they don't have the permission to be forthcoming on information?

BC: Well, this is where Kofi Annan changed things. Boutros-Ghali used to say to me -- when the UN had 189 members at the time -- "Why should I be spending all my time worrying about the attitude of one member state? I've got all these other 188 Member States." Which was a good answer but not realistic. Kofi Annan has been more than willing to work on this. He's been very effective. He's made a lot of friends in the community, people who are influential. I once wrote about his life in New York for the metropolitan section of the *Times*. They called him a very social Secretary-General. He goes to all these parties. His friends said that he is building bridges for the UN in banking and politics and City Hall, wherever you want it to go. But there was a lot of griping in the UN about this, that this was not the right thing to do. "Why are they going to parties?" "That is not work; he is just having too good a time."

I have a big theory about what I call the 'culture of information' and I could just give a slice of it here. A lot of the countries that are members here and therefore also have people in the Secretariat to put pressure on DPI do not come from cultures of information. A European, or a Latin American, or a North American, or many Asians and Africans know how information is used: How you share it, how you decide when to release it, how to time it, how to make its biggest impact. There are a lot of people in the UN system, a lot of member countries, who see information as something to be kept from people, except when it is offered as part of public relations. DPI has often had this problem. Then they complain that the press isn't covering the UN, often when they come out with some turgid report or a long press statement that says nothing. You do not need a public relations firm. That is the other extreme people jump to. Smart use of information has got to come from within

JK: And the issue that has been told to me is that the UN can't deal with preventive diplomacy to a great extent, in terms of providing information to the media, because you

are intruding on people's sovereignty. You are talking about Darfur, or you are talking about Chechnya, or you are talking about very sensitive, domestic, political issues.

BC: Right. This mentality even goes down to protecting people who have been charged or convicted of corruption within the system. It's issues; it's people; it's all sorts of things. There will be people who say, "Get out there and say how bad it is." In a way, Kofi Annan finally did it with Darfur. He's talked about other areas too, rather than throw issues back at the Security Council and say over and over again, "It is now in the hands of the Council; there is nothing I can do." Many officials are skittish of this. In many ways they are super diplomats, protecting national images. I think Mark Malloch Brown [Annan's chief of staff after 2004] will not be. Mark Malloch Brown at UNDP [where he was administrator] was courageous. For example, he backed the controversial publication of the Arab Human Development Reports, created by a very talented woman, Rima al-Hussani. He gave her a free hand. The first Arab Human Development Report was a bombshell because the UN doesn't normally do that, point a finger, say, "These are reasons you are failing; and this is how badly you are failing." Kofi Annan brought a new information policy to the UN: "Anyone who is competent to speak for his or her own area of competency should. In other words, you don't have to keep bucking up the ladder saying, "Can I talk about this?" "If you are in charge of this, talk about it." Not everybody picked up on this.

JK: They were used to a different culture.

BC: They were used to a different culture. They are protecting themselves. They don't want to lose their jobs because they are in their positions by the grace of some government. Boutros-Ghali used to talk about what he thought was the disgraceful way some governments nominated people for jobs. You have geographical distribution so countries can say you don't have enough of country x or of region x, so here's my candidate. Yet nominees were often by far not the best people in those countries. So, two things happen: you are forced to appoint somebody to a job who is not going to do it well, and some people are going to say that you can't have these third world people in here; they make a mess of it. Which is very unfair because there are plenty of good people from all regions who could be holding these jobs. You know them; you see them at Yale; you see them at Harvard.

But governments don't often nominate those people. The same with women. Louise Frechette [former Deputy Secretary-General] said that she got where she was because Canada had promoted women in the government, as Boutros-Ghali did in Egypt. Many countries are not promoting women, or members of minority groups, within their own systems. So, they do not reach the top and then get noticed by the international system.

There are other obstacles to the free flow of information. Look at the pressure the Chinese have exerted to keep the Taiwanese out of the UN press room, which is really a gross violation of the agreement with the press. Or the fact that the Dalai Lama can never appear at UN headquarters. Even Secretary General Annan has refused to overrule the Chinese, despite advice to the contrary from his staff. That is disgraceful.

JK: So, he, himself, is pressured to some degree, or feels it from the P-5 at least.

BC: Yes, well it not always just the P-5. What I understand from just the sidelines is that if there is going to be something controversial involving the media, it doesn't take very long for a permanent representative to request a meeting with the Secretary-General and deliver the message from the government that, "We would find this step unhelpful." The Burmese have tried it over events that have involved human rights in Burma. When Taiwan wanted help from the World Health Organization during the first SARS epidemic in 2003, the Chinese stepped in to block them. The Taiwanese were not legally able to tap into the World Health Organization as other nations were because they are not UN members. China has been blocking every Taiwanese step; they don't want Taiwan in the UN in increments.

The US doesn't, under any administration, try to muzzle the media or the flow of information at the UN as an institution. American diplomats may not tell everyone what is happening in the Security Council, but that is different matter of common diplomatic policy. Diplomats from other countries do often share more information with journalists. American policy decisions are more often leaked in Washington, catching UN correspondents off guard.

JK: You have touched a little bit on various crises that the Secretary-General has faced, but just to get back to that, how well have Secretaries-General in the past dealt with a crisis, particularly one that may have been embarrassing, an embarrassing disclosure? Have Pérez de Cuéllar or Boutros-Ghali handled it any differently than Kofi Annan?

BC: I don't think that Boutros-Ghali ever faced the kind of crisis that the oil-for-food investigation has created. Boutros-Ghali faced political crises. He had on his mental list instances where he said he knew he had put his foot down wrong in relations particularly with the US. I mentioned one, the Srebrenica massacre. I was on a trip to Africa then. In Africa, he stood in a field of bones of people who had been killed in the Rwanda genocide, among pieces of hair, up to his ankles in rags of clothes in a churchyard. And he said afterwards, "How could I tell the people in Rwanda that I have to abandon my trip because of a village in Europe." The phrase "a village in Europe" enraged a lot of people in Washington, because Bosnia was high on the scope of thinking in Europe and North America. That was a political blunder, perhaps, but it was an honest statement of what he believed. The Africans didn't, or couldn't, defend him. He was left hanging out there. That was one.

Then there was a tough UN report on Israeli attacks on a refugee camp in Southern Lebanon in 1996 that killed 98 civilians. Boutros-Ghali said, or he implied, that the US and Israel wanted that report either rewritten or suppressed. Because he didn't, that was a big black mark against him in Washington, he thought.

JK: Before we get to the oil-for-food program, one of the things that we wanted to ask was, did this kind of negativity within the media or from the Member States have an influence on the Secretary-General's effectiveness

BC: I think what had an influence was in many ways the media inattention and ignorance of the organization, even before it reached a point of criticism or hostility, as during the oil for food crisis. A lot of things happened in the 1990s in the media, post-Cold War, not necessarily related only to the Cold War. One of them was the personalization of news and celebrity writing. I found a diminution of interest in institutions. So, one of the problems I had as a correspondent here -- and I was here seven years -- was trying to write about the UN as an institution from time-to-time, or people in it. Questions like: Where is the Security Council going? Richard Holbrooke tried to change some of the workings of the Security Council to introduce what were really the Economic and Social Council's issues because they were not being addressed. With this kind of thing I was met with a big yawn. But if I wrote that Peter Burleigh, who was acting ambassador for a while, bought all his bowties from some place in Vermont, that was more fun and space was found for it. The same for a wonderful little booklet written by a French ambassador, Alain Dejammet, about where to find places to sleep in UN headquarters when meetings got boring.

It became a much more personalized news era, and the UN didn't seem to understand this was coming and what to do about it. The UN can no longer be a faceless glass box. There are wonderful, terrific characters. Hans Corell, the former legal counsel, played the bagpipes and wore a kilt to dinners. There were people who were sometimes corny, sometimes outrageous, and wonderfully clever. But these people never seem to get out into the public consciousness in New York. The media was changing and the UN wasn't changing with it.

You can come to the case of Kofi Annan. He understood a lot of this. He did what he could and now he's still in trouble, and probably more so because he is a familiar figure. It is a terrible irony. Now there is this sort of glee at bringing him down among the people who don't like the organization. So, this is really a bad lesson for the United Nations. Here we have a Secretary-General who tried to get to know people and be recognized in public, and what happened? It didn't help at all.

JK: What is different about the oil-for-food program? You said it is different. In what way is it different?

BC: For years, critical opinion among many people in this country has been based on a complete lack of data. Corruption is always a big word. "The UN is corrupt." Well, it isn't really. As you know, there is no capital base. There is money in and money out from the nations. There is very little opportunity for the kind of corruption people assume. There were things that happened, of course. When the Office of the Internal Oversight Services started under Karl Paschke one of the first startling decisions they made was that they would allow courts to prosecute people if there were criminal acts. It used to be that you could get immunity for an awful lot of stuff. Well, the first two people prosecuted were American citizens and it was for infractions like inventing phony

programs and then getting money for them, or stealing travelers' checks. They were relatively small scale crimes. The UN was also criticized for deadbeat dads. There are wives whose marriages came unstuck here and they are left without money because in the countries where they come from there is no child support. Politicians here took it up. I used to argue. You could go to any big organization, IBM, the *New York Times*, the city government, and you would find a certain number of men who are behind on payments. Here they had, unfortunately, the perfectly legal right not to pay. But the UN was held by the media to be violating women's rights. That story never got much traction, however.

Now, along comes this oil-for-food program and a lot of people who have been critical of the UN see a real piece of meat. Now here we are talking real corruption. Reporters are running around looking for 12 to 20 billion dollars of missing money illegally acquired by Saddam Hussein and UN officials he wanted to reward. As the Secretary-General tried to say over and over again, a large percentage of this money was from oil smuggled out over the borders of Iraq under the eyes of the United States, Britain, Russia, France, and all the others. At least from the year 1999 or 2000, I remember reading warnings in the Secretary-General's reports. In fact, I wrote a front page story in March of 2001 about companies starting to squeal about demands for kickbacks and how the Iraqis were taking ten percent here and ten percent there off the contracts that were in theory supervised by the Security Council and its Iraq sanctions committee.

So, here we have a situation where critics of UN can now say, "Aha, you see it has been corrupt all these years. In the case of Boutros-Ghali, the charges were political, and that made it different. If you say he was anti-American and did not understand the United States, or if it was not astute to say the things that he said about Bosnia, that was political. But with oil for food, the critics really feel they have found criminal activity on the part of the Organization. It is the difference between disagreements over policy in which the Secretary-General has ranged against the United States and a sense of serious internal problem. I notice even people who are trying to be moderate in reporting calling it the oil-for-food "scandal." This assumes that the scandal was entirely inside the Secretariat. And as you know, many outsiders don't understand the difference between the Secretariat, and the Security Council.

JK: What is very, very frustrating in this whole situation is that the media does not make the distinction between the oil-for-food program where oil was sold under the auspices of the UN and food and compensation were paid for out of those revenues and the oil that was sold on the black market to oil companies, some based in the US or France, or other parts of the world. There is a certain amount of deflection.

BC: Right, and then, I am sorry to say, willfully wrong reporting, or willfully negative reporting by some correspondents who are listening to some of the people in Congress who want to deflect blame, reporters who see a way to make headlines and who don't come back to check facts with the UN except for a pro forma denial every time another story breaks. I think in Europe it is getting to be quite serious also. In Switzerland, there have been newspaper campaigns with persistent negative reporting, and some in Italy. I think the concern is that the Secretary-General is picking up criticism in places where he

hadn't before. I certainly think that in the United States it is a deflection of responsibility because anyone who was on the Security Council then knows full well what was happening and who was to blame..

I went to briefings by intelligence people from Washington who came and talked about the extent to which oil was being smuggled. There was the "close our eyes to it" kind of thing. I went from Amman to Baghdad and back by road in 1998, and you could see a constant string of oil tankers going to Jordan and the empty ones coming back. Ditto, people said, to Turkey. There was so much smuggling going on to keep these countries happy because they would have been hurt, especially Jordan, by a cutoff of Iraqi oil under sanctions. The US and others were just allowing these people to operate outside the system. That was where the large majority of the money came from. The British and the Americans had ships out in the Gulf and trying to intercept oil going to other parts of the Middle East or toward Iran or West Asia. So, everybody knew this was happening. It was in the Secretary-General's reports.

Once again, people are not doing their homework. Reporters in Washington are grabbing a little piece of what they think is hot stuff. They are not going into the archives here; they are not looking at the reports that show the information. They are not going to talk to the former chairmen of the sanctions committees who tried over and over again to draw attention to the illegal sales. He is Peter van Walsum, a Dutch diplomat. He told me that Benon Sevan himself [the director of the oil for food program] went to the Council and said, "You've got to pay attention." We will find out eventually whether Benon Sevan himself was involved in or not, but from Van Walsum's recollection, Sevan was disgusted by the inattention of the Council and simply walked away from the problem.

JK: Timothy Wirth said one time when he was speaking here at the UN that there are certain members of Congress that always throw things at the UN to see what will stick. Now, they were able to get something to stick.

BC: That is exactly in a short statement what I took all that time to say. This is what makes this oil-for-food different. For years, people are going to talk about the oil-for-food scandal and it is going to be associated with the United Nations Secretariat and I don't know what the Volker report in its final form will do to disabuse people of that.

JK: What can the UN do, or the Secretary-General do, when they are confronted with so much misinformation? And in this case, it is misinformation that is potentially harmful.

BC: I say to myself, what would someone in the State Department or in Congress do? For one thing, somebody at the UN would be assigned the task: "Go into the files and get me the Secretary-General's reports from 1998 to 2001 that raise this issue and throw it into the Security Council's lap." They could simply extract relevant paragraphs about illegal commissions, the interference by Saddam Hussein. When I did this as a reporter, I used to get in trouble with the people like Voices in the Wilderness [an anti-sanctions movement] because they thought I was too hard on the Iraqi government. There were various kinds of Iraqi corruption. For example, Saddam Hussein's government refused to

accept tons of powdered milk from the Dutch because the Iraqis were angry with the Netherlands. So, food was actually kept from the Iraqi people for propaganda reasons, for political reasons.

You could say to your staff member, "Collect a dossier on this issue and let's get it out. Make copies, paper clip or staple it together, put one in every office of the correspondents, and say, Here is the background. Just in case you need this." A lot of reporters don't have time or they are not interested in looking into history. The UN website is still an unholy mess when it comes to finding something in a hurry. So, have a briefing and have someone from the old oil-for-food office available for any journalist who wants the information. Reporters wouldn't have an excuse to say, "Well, we did not know about that."

This is an old story. Boutros-Ghali was accused of not sending enough peacekeepers to Bosnia in the mid 1990s. As he would say, he asked for some 34,000; they gave him 7,000 and only about 5,000 of those ever showed up. I don't remember the exact numbers. Get them on a piece of paper and hand it out. Send it to the foreign editors of all these media organizations with a polite letter saying from the Secretary-General, "We just wanted to draw to your attention that this is the history of this and maybe you could pass it on to the person who is writing about it."

Once you get it into the head of someone that maybe there is more to this story, they will pay attention, or they feel they have to pay attention if they feel they are a legitimately, honest, fair news organization. That is where a sort of swat team here could be useful. Just a letter to the editor every six weeks or so or even an Op-Ed piece once a year from the hierarchy here is not the same. You need to get to the editor who is directing the correspondent, to the people who shape the news. I don't think they do that. This again relates to a culture of information.

JK: If you put the burden completely on Kofi Annan it sounds like he is whining.

BC: Exactly.

JK: And that's not good either, so the institution itself has to do something to get the information out there. Because there is so much information that explains what happened.

BC: The way that Jean-Marie Guéhenno [under secretary general for peacekeeping] has handled the issue of the abuses of women by peacekeepers in the Congo. He has got a lot more stuff out. That is a story that is not new either, though it has been made to look like the UN is now suddenly abusing women. East Timor, Cambodia, every case where I have known a UN mission, this has been a problem. And the fault begins with the national armies sending troops to the UN. Some countries are quite good. In Cambodia, the Bangladeshis sent anybody home who was caught misbehaving. Yet, you get other countries that have terrible reputations for abuse, way back to the burst of UN peacekeeping in the early 1990s. Somebody who could package the information, it may

not be pretty, but at least package it and say, "This is the problem; we dealt with it. Now the Secretary-General has this out in the open and we are going to see what more we can do, but the countries that provide the troops have got to sign onto some punishment." And they don't.

JK: It is very different, country by country. It depends on the contingent. You can have one contingent in this part of the country where there is no problem and a contingent in another part of the country where there is a problem.

BC: That was the case in Cambodia in 1992-93. People would say, "We were very lucky; we had this battalion here. But boy what happened in San ??, you won't believe." Celhia de Lavarene, a French woman who used to work for Radio France, is fulltime now trying to start an NGO called Stop, which is against the sexual abuse of women in peacekeeping. She has had a variety of experiences with commanders and others. And in fact, if she gets too active and the SRSG allows her to do too much, the SRSG can get in trouble also. There is still pressure from governments. You want peacekeepers from country x, then lay off this issue. "Boys will be boys" is the infamous line that SRSG Yasushi Akashi used in Cambodia.

JK: You mentioned that the type of media is changing and I was wondering if you could address that issue in your time period as you have gone from newsprint to TV to internet, how has that changed in your experience? How does that affect things?

BC: Interesting, we haven't mentioned the internet until now. The internet has been part of the problem of getting the true story out about what is going on with oil-for-food and other things here. The internet has been used to attack reporters who, including me, who have relationships with organizations that support the UN. Bloggers have passed around the country really vicious stuff about people. Linda Fasulo wrote a book on the UN, *The Insider's Guide to the UN*. They have been merciless with her. They said she got money from the UN Foundation. Do they know what the UN Foundation is? That it is not a part of the UN? She has said, "Of course I did; it says so in the jacket of the book. I thanked the UN Foundation." I was criticized because when I left the UN bureau and retired from the *Times* the UN Foundation, UNA-USA, and the *Times* gave me a dinner at the Harvard Club. The blogger found out what it cost and raised the issue of whether I was in the pocket of the UN. It was a misunderstanding; it was a thank you from the UNA and the UN Foundation for my reporting. Maybe I should have said that they shouldn't thank me in that way. The point was that it was a completely harmless evening. They could have given me an award; they gave me a dinner.

Early in 2005 when the anti-UN bloggers thought the UN was in big trouble, one of their techniques was to discredit or undermine the authority of people who had written about the UN with knowledge and over a long period of time, the people who would say, "Wait a minute, let me explain."

The UN does a lot of good on the internet. I say in lectures in developing countries that it helps level the playing field for journalists, who can now, for example, cover issues like

pandemics and so forth, through the World Health Organization website. It is a whole new world of information that you can use the same way that someone in New York City can, even if you are sitting somewhere in the back of Brazil, or Cambodia, or Vietnam. You can access good information almost as good as any newspaper journalist anywhere can.

The internet, for being in a way under the surface can do a lot of damage. A lot of people who do not know the UN will read some of these blogs will be persuaded by negative postings and accusations. Even television can't undo these impressions. I think television has always had a problem here. Richard Roth does an absolutely brilliant job for CNN of trying to make the UN human. He tries to ferret out untold stories. But television reporters have a very difficult time getting cameras into most places. So, the kind of human interest stories reporters can find in the halls of Congress you don't get here. That's very hard for television reporters from all over the world. Cameras may have been welcome at big UN conferences. But if you said, "Could I just wander through ECOSOC with a camera, the answer would be No.

JK: What do you mean by that?

BC: Cameras are off limits in most of UN headquarters. They will say you can have a camera here at the stakeout outside the Security Council. You can have a camera in the back of room 226 for press conferences" You have to go through hoops to get permission for most other places. As a result, of all of the American television companies, only CNN works here, very hard, full-time, and has two or three very good people. The other television stations have abandoned the UN. They come only when there is a big Security Council meeting. They set their cameras up in place just like a State Department stakeout. The State Department doesn't let you wander around with a camera either. It is an institutional problem and a security problem. But it is something that has to be thought about here because it does create this screen in front of the UN, so people don't know that it is inhabited by people.

The problem extends to New York City when it comes to integrating the UN into New York life and coverage, so people understand what a big diplomatic city this is. Most people don't know that. They don't know the difference between the diplomats and the UN staff.

JK: In that case, the Secretary-General can, and I think in Kofi Annan's case has, very much used that, used his position as a bully pulpit, for example, to promote the Millennium Goals, or to talk about HIV/AIDS, globally, and that sort of thing. Has that been an asset for the UN or for Kofi Annan?

BC: He has done much better at dinner parties and at events where he speaks to groups of people who are pretty well informed than he has in general with the popular media. He is also very soft spoken and he is deliberately not provocative or combative. Maybe if

you had somebody who was, TV would be more interested. That is a tragic comment on TV, I mean, get somebody out there who is going to fight with somebody else. He is reasonable. He and his wife want to be very private at home. I know this from my own experience because I wrote a piece once about how the Boutros-Ghali lived in the secretary-general's official residence and it was great. They showed me collections of various things from all over the world and they talked about life there. When I asked Nane Annan whether I could do the same with them, because I was interested in an African bringing a new character to the residence, she didn't want to do it. The Annans had a Ghanaian chief's throne and wonderful African textiles. She said originally, and I didn't follow up after that, that she didn't want to be compared with anybody else.

JK: He is in a difficult position because a lot of his job is to carry on quiet diplomacy.

BC: Right, and that was Boutros-Ghali's argument, "if I tell you what I am doing, I can't do my job anymore." And the rest of the world, as you were suggesting earlier, in a way forces him into that position. But so do officials in the American government. The difference is that in the American government, you have got reporters who can ferret out what is happening. And you get people who leak or whistle blowers. Until recently, there have been very few whistle blowers in the UN system because they are terrified of losing their jobs and their visas. You get almost no leaks in the UN system. But you do get people whom you build a relationship with who will tell you things that can sometimes be quite explosive and interesting. But again you are dealing with editors who say, "Well, where does this take the story? Who's going to jail? What's the bottom line?" And you say, "I just want to write it because that is the way the institution works, or we are finding this out." So, it is both sides.

JK: So, how do you convince an editor that the UN is worth writing about?

BC: In retrospect, my argument is that it should be used as a base for international reporting and as a counter-weight to reporting from Washington. I have discussed this with a former Mexican ambassador, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser who had also been a columnist for La Reforma in Mexico, so he's been on both sides. He said that during the pre-Iraq war the US preemptively leaked its intentions in the Security Council to certain journalists in Washington. This kept reporting around the Security Council down. My argument would be: this is what the Americans say, now let's go interview some other ambassadors and find out what the rest of the world is thinking.

It is harder to do in the Secretariat, but not with the diplomatic corps, necessarily. You can find a lot of things out and then work on them. There is not enough of that done, so it isn't in the minds of editors that this is a very good place for international reporting. One example of missing this kind of story here: After all the fuss over the International Criminal Court (ICC) and how the US doesn't want to have anything to do with it, lo and behold, at the end of March [2005] the US allowed the Darfur case to go to the Court. This could have been a page one story as far as I'm concerned, but it is an institutional story. If people don't have in their heads the background to this, they don't know why it

is a big story. There were any number of people here who would have been willing to comment on this and what a watershed it was.

JK: To the reading, for example, I do follow these things. To me, as a reader, when it is handled so quietly, it is in the *New York Times* but nothing much is made out of it. This makes me think that maybe the US, the administration, is actually putting some pressure on the paper not to make it a big story.

BC: "Pressure" might be a word that everybody would reject, but I am sure the feeling is the same. It is spin control. "Don't get too excited about this; we just want to be seen to be doing something on Darfur, not acknowledging the court."

JK: It may be that behind the scenes negotiations are something they really don't want the public to know about. The other story that I think is very interesting is the whole Syria issue of pulling its troops out of Lebanon. We know that there was a Security Council resolution on that in the fall [2004]. But we don't know very much about that was created. Where did that come from?

BC: In fact, that Security Council resolution didn't really get much attention until after the death of Rafik Hariri [a former Lebanese prime minister] and the pressure was on Syria. And then all of a sudden everyone ran around with this resolution. Right from then on, it was clear that the US and France had found one issue they could work on together; and they did. That in itself was an interesting story.

JK: Right, it was more than just a resolution coming out of the Security Council, it was a major-power agreement that was represented by this particular resolution.

BC: Exactly, and this relationship between France and the US was not just Condoleezza Rice going to Paris. It was more, that on certain issues they could work together. The changing relationship between the US and Europe could be reported very well from the UN because there are always excellent ambassadors from Europe here, not just the big countries. I found that the people in the Security Council who told me the most about what was happening inside the closed-door meetings were often from the nonpermanent members. They were sitting on the sidelines, as an American once told me, they know when not to talk. But they listen and they watch. And they can come up with a wonderful sense of atmosphere. You get a real sense of what is happening in the room, in the closed-door room, before they get out in the "horse shoe" and on television. US-European relations, big issues that are global, whether it is health or whatever within the UN system, there are ways to report these things that are really very effective. That is what I would argue, to use the UN as more of a resource.

The UN has to meet its part of the bargain and have a door open somewhere to a journalist, let's say from Washington, or wherever, who wants to come and get a briefing. There are people here who would be excellent. There are other people who would be absolutely hostile to the idea.

One of the best of UN officials when it came to briefing journalists was Joseph Chamie, who retired in 2005 as director of the Population Division. Where is the world going in demographics? He was the first one who talked me into doing a story about the aging of Europe. It was three or four years ago. The Europeans jumped on him. You asked earlier about pressure. They jumped on him because they were having problems with the anti-immigration lobby. And here comes the UN saying the Europeans are going to need immigrants, otherwise they are going to run out of labor. They were furious that he seemed to get into the political debate. He would do a briefing at the drop of a hat. There are others who won't..

JK: We are almost at the end and we have covered everything that I had written down and more. It has been great. Is there anything else that you would like to add as to the relationship between the media and the UN?

BC: I can send you an email message if I think of anything or we could talk on the phone. I think you asked all the questions that were relevant.

JK: Thank you so much.



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