



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General

Q: Can we begin with the day itself? Can you tell me how you heard what had happened and what you did?

ANNAN: I was home. I was just about to leave for the office. My wife and I had had breakfast, gone through the papers, and just as I was about to step out, the call came in from the security, saying please stay home for the moment. I said, "What's the matter?". They said, "There has been an accident. A small plane has run into the World Trade tower, but we are investigating to see what happened." So then I went and turned on CNN and, of course, as we watched it we were wondering what had happened, who could have done this. The second plane eventually came and it became very clear. But the initial reaction was a small plane had run into World Trade Center, and I thought a group of tourists being taken around Lower Manhattan and how can one make such a mistake. Then, of course, my god, when we saw what had happened, you know...

Q: And you drafted a statement, or you issued a statement by lunch-time that day, I think?

ANNAN: Yes, we issued a statement lunch-time, indicating how appalled we were, and in subsequent statements indicated that, even though this was an attack on the United States, it was an attack on our common humanity, and that we needed to stand together and to fight this terror. But it also had an impact on the staff because the building was evacuated. And when I eventually got here they had come back in. For the next couple of days I think, not just in this building, but the whole city seemed to be walking around in mass depression or in a daze. I mean people were functioning, moving around, but it hadn't sunk in. One couldn't really comprehend what had happened.

Q: The next day, a resolution was passed. Were you surprised by the degree of unanimity there was, because it was quite a tough resolution, wasn't it?

ANNAN: Yes, it was a tough resolution and it came very promptly. The Council acted promptly and subsequently so did the General Assembly. I think - by the standards of this house - it was surprising. But if you consider the nature of the act, which I described as an attack on all of us, I wasn't surprised either because, of course, we were attacked and collectively we rose to the occasion, realised we had to defend ourselves. Of course, there was also the question of the Council and the leadership and moving the process forward.

Q: Did you have any doubt in your own mind at that stage that this was something that was covered by self-defence for the United States, that if they wanted to take military action it would be covered by that idea?

ANNAN: I felt that if they wanted to, that the Council would go along with that because of the nature of it and the brutal nature of the attack, that the Council will agree to self-defence, and they had a right to self-defence. And I didn't see anyone in the Council objecting to that.

Q: You talked to President Bush quite early I think, certainly on the 18th, perhaps on other occasions. Can you tell me anything about those conversations, what he wanted from you, what he told you?

ANNAN: Those kinds of conversations are a bit..

Q: Of course I understand, but can you give me a sense of the mood of the president?

ANNAN: I think he was determined and resolved that it's not something one can accept, and one will have to defend the people and the country, but of course, it had to be done in a methodical manner. But there was a resolve. There was appreciation for the fact that the whole world had rallied, appreciation for the fact that there were candlelight processions in European cities, and very positive and supportive and messages of sympathy and condolence coming from around the world. It was an interesting phenomenon because you had people in the States who were going around saying, "Why do they hate us so much?" So, you had why do they hate us so much, and then the other side, "We have so many friends." Particularly during that early, early period.

Q: How did you react when the bombing of Afghanistan began?

ANNAN: I think we knew it was coming. I mean that the US was going to react and that it was coming. I wasn't terribly surprised, you know.

Q: And you issued a statement saying you felt it was definitely covered by self-defence.

ANNAN: In my first statements, yes. I said that it was, not only covered by.. but covered by the Security Council resolution.

Q: Quite early on after the bombing began, the question of peacekeeping forces in a post-conflict Afghanistan was being discussed, and you made it very clear, as I understand it, that you didn't see there ever being UN peacekeeping forces. Can you explain why?

ANNAN: Because of the nature of the operation that one was thinking of, and the terrain and the operational difficulties in Afghanistan, I was confident that we would not have the requisite number of forces to be able to do the kind of job that we'd be expected to do. And we had also agreed in an earlier study that, in some of the really tough operations, we should encourage a coalition of the willing to do it. And in the end that's what we did, with ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) going to Kabul. And, of course, the US forces were also on the ground. So you have two armies in the theatre, ISAF and the US military, even though they co-ordinated the command structure.

Q: Do you think that means that the days when we would automatically look to the United Nations for peacekeeping forces in this kind of thing are now behind us?

ANNAN: No, they are not behind us. One can come to the UN, but we will have to make the judgement whether it is a kind of operation and the kind of environment that one would want to introduce UN 'blue helmets' [into], sometimes lightly armed. Or it is a kind of environment where you need a robust army with a capacity and logistical assets to carry on the operation. In this case we decided that it would have to be a multinational force. But the Council endorsed that. So the Council can determine that a force should go in, and make a judgement whether they should be 'blue helmets', or authorise other countries to do it under a UN flag.

Q: Towards, I think the end of September and in October, the United States started paying some of the money it owes you, and also stumping up some money for peacekeeping troops, or for past peacekeeping operations. Did that take you by surprise?

ANNAN: No, it didn't because we had been working on it for sometime and working on the US government and the Congress and Senate. In fact, I had been talking to the president about this very early in the year. I recall even a conversation I had had with him months before this attack. I thanked him for the efforts he is making to get the debt to the UN paid, and his remark was interesting, he said, "Don't thank me. We owe you, we should pay our debts." And that I thought was very refreshing.

Q: Do you think it would have happened had it not been for September the 11th?

ANNAN: It could have, but I think this September 11 may have helped. I think the atmosphere that was created in the sense that we all need to stick together, and that the UN came into the centre of things. We should not forget that the resolutions that the Security Council passed and what happened in the General Assembly were historic. I mean they responded promptly. And also, if we are going to win this war against terrorism, I don't think we are going to be able to do it through military means. It has to be through international law, co-operation, the sort of resolutions and conventions that this organisation has passed. If you talk to, say, Jeremy (Sir Jeremy Greenstock, British ambassador to the UN) it's been remarkable, the co-operation he is getting from the member states on the counter-terrorism committee. He's got over 90 reports from governments telling him what they are doing and how they are responding to this terrorism. And if we build on this Security Council resolution, which demands that we do not have or support violence, or give any material support to terrorists, and share information, we could create a situation where they have nowhere to hide. In the long run, through that international co-operation, we can really squeeze them in a way that we cannot do with military action around the world.

Q: Was there a period towards the end of October and beginning of November when you became anxious about the time the bombing campaign seemed to be taking, particularly about the implications it had for humanitarian aid?

ANNAN: Yes, we did. It's always a dilemma because we were worried that the longer it went on, the greater the impact it will have on our humanitarian activities. We were also worried that some of the airports may be bombed and destroyed, and these are the airports that we would eventually have needed if you had to get major supplies in. And as long as fighting was

going on and the population - which were often in the urban centres - had dispersed and gone into rural areas, we couldn't reach them as readily as we would have liked to. So we were worried, that's correct.

Q: And are you concerned that the UN might become a target in some cases? There were attacks in Pakistan I think on UN staff and ..

ANNAN: .. the refugee camps, yes, yes.

Q: Bin Laden himself associated the United Nations in one of his videos with the war on Muslims. Did that worry you?

ANNAN: It was a bit worrying. I worried for my staff and the operations. Of course I was cited personally, but it didn't scare me as I had work to do. So I went ahead with my work. But I was worried for our staff who are spread all over the world, in very dangerous situations, giving assistance to people in need, and they were terribly exposed. But luckily that did not happen. But we were worried and we strengthened our security, which is not a big operation, but we needed to get in a bit more people and to get staff to be more cautious.

Q: Can you describe the way the effort to put together. An interim regime after the fall of Kabul was co-ordinated between your special envoy and the Americans. Did you work closely together on that?

ANNAN: I think that quite a lot of the credit should go to Lakhdar Brahimi who really was very steady. And, of course, the US and quite a lot of the countries in the Six-plus-Two group: the US, Russia, [the] Iranians. All of them worked very closely, and in Bonn the US delegate was very helpful, and so were the Iranians. But Lakhdar, who had been handling the Afghan problem for quite some time, he had been there and left. Then I convinced him to come back. [He] knew the culture, knew the people, knew the leaders, and that knowledge was of immeasurable value as we went ahead and pressed ahead in Kabul. But I think you are right. If the countries had not co-operated it would have been difficult, because right from the beginning we said we should get the Six-plus-Two to work with us. We should get the neighbours to stop backing different horses and work with us in moving everyone in the same direction and establish an interim administration. And miraculously it worked.

Q: You talked about the importance of continuing to work through the United Nations in the long term in the war against terrorism. Do you think that that message is understood as you would like it to be in Washington at the moment?

ANNAN: ... Perhaps there's room for improvement, I think we can do better. I think quite a lot of them understand it, but we need to perhaps repeat it a bit more often.

Q: And is Iraq one of the areas where you feel they could, as you say, do better?

ANNAN: I think on Iraq they are hearing from so many people, from Europe, from the Middle East... And I myself have indicated that I think it would be unwise to bomb Iraq. They are coming here to see me at the end of the month to continue the discussion on the return of the inspectors, and I hope they will realise that that is the only solution, and that the only way

they are going to see light at the end of the day, as they put it, and end the suffering of their people, is by complying with the Security Council resolutions.

Q: But to be absolutely clear on your position, you don't believe that action against Iraq would be covered by self-defence in the way that action against Afghanistan was?

ANNAN: I think that would be a question for the Council to determine. I'm not sure the Council would vote for that, the way they voted for Afghanistan.

Q: You said you were surprised by George Bush's comments about the "axis of evil", can you explain why that surprised you?

ANNAN: I think we live in a very complex world and this is an organisation which embraces all member states and all regimes and deals with different faiths and different beliefs. And we have been dealing with Washington and all these countries, and I have not had an inkling that some of the countries, apart from Iraq that one hears a lot about in Washington - that one was going to brand Iran, for example, as an "axis of evil". So the statement came out of the blue from my point of view, although I knew the US position towards those three countries. But then when countries get branded that way, it does complicate relationships and also the possibility of influencing them.

Q: Finally, can I ask you whether you think that mood of co-operation that appears to have existed here in the immediate aftermath of 11th September will survive through the next phase of the war on terrorism? And with comments about the "axis of evil", or with the possibility of action against Iraq and so forth, do you think that that mood will be preserved?

ANNAN: Let me say that, first of all, I don't know much about the next phase of the fight against terrorism. I've heard talk about the next phase. Some imply that it includes attacks on Iraq and other countries. I'm not quite sure that in the end that's the way it will go, but be as it may, I believe that we have established a solid relationship which will go through the usual stresses in all relationships. But I think it will survive. Right now we're going through some tensions on policy on the Middle East. The European approach to the Middle East crisis is quite different from the Washington approach. Although, in Madrid I think we all came together at the meeting that was organised with myself, Secretary of State Powell, Igor Ivanov and Foreign Minister Josep Pique of Spain, and (Javier) Solana. We agreed on a common approach and supported the secretary of state's mission to the region. I think we can work together, but that we will go through some tensions on the Middle East situation. But I think we will survive it.