



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Jeremy Greenstock, UK Ambassador to the United Nations

STOURTON: ... Tell us where you were when it happened, how you heard and what you did.

GREENSTOCK: Well it was five to nine on a Tuesday morning, and I was on my way to the weekly EU heads of mission meeting, and my driver said to me he had the news on, a plane has crashed into the World Trade Centre, and I said well that's odd, some small plane, he said no, it doesn't sound like that. I got out of my car. I got up into the European Union meeting and after about five or ten minutes, somebody said there's another plane that's crashed into the other world trade building, so at first I thought it was an accident, after the second one I knew it was a terrorist incident and then when, fifteen minutes later we heard that the Pentagon had been hit, I personally felt this has to be Al Qaeda, it can't be anything else. So we moved through those stages, those of us who pay attention to these things, very quickly to realising that this is Osama bin Laden at work, and the meeting then rather sort of drained of interest on other issues, and we went back to our offices and the television was already on in our conference room downstairs, and we sat watching and, and the thing really hit me when we saw the world trade centres collapse, then we realised that thousands of people had been killed, and that the world wasn't going to be the same again, because the people who had done this were going to be the object of revenge and, and self defence by the United States in a way which we hadn't seen before. These things came crowding in from the beginnings of a banal Tuesday morning, into realising that, by midday the world had to change in several respects because of this. Those were the first three hours.

STOURTON: What did you then do, presumably you talked to London, did you talk to other colleagues here.

GREENSTOCK: Well the first thing that happened was that the UN building was closed down. This wasn't just the UN running for its life because something had happened elsewhere, we have had specific threats against the UN building before, and indeed I think in material that's come out since, the UN building was one of the buildings that Al Qaeda, the people in Afghanistan, had thought of targeting, so it wasn't fanciful to think that there could be another plane in the air somewhere headed at that matchbox shape, and so we, we stopped all our work and came back to our offices, that was the first thing that happened, and then we thought how is the United Nations system going to react to this. Kofi Annan, who's very good in his public pronouncements and getting things on, on the line very quickly, had said something by lunchtime, and then we had to talk to the Americans obviously about how we reacted to this, and how quickly there might be an official statement, but by the next morning, we and the French decided, because the Americans were focusing on other things that we

should run an immediate resolution, quite a tough one, both condemning the act of 11 September and specifying that there was a right of self defence in the UN charter which could be activated in these circumstances, and it passed without a murmur through the security council later that morning. There was a general assembly resolution in the same sense, so that every single member of the United Nations, not just 15 on the Security Council, had voted for a resolution condemning the act, and that is quick in UN terms.

STOURTON: And how much debate, if any, was there about the question of whether self defence was the appropriate way to look at it, were there people saying hang on, this is something that ought to come to the United Nations, that ought to have the rubber stamp of a resolution before actual military action is taken at that stage.

GREENSTOCK: No. I mean you would expect in normal UN circumstances there to be quite careful examination of a text like that, which might seem to open up legal precedence and et cetera, and there are members of the Security Council who would be fairly precise in their approach. The shock was great in the whole international community, and the sense of sympathy with New York and the United Nations in what had happened just down there, just out of sight behind the buildings was an influence on people, and nobody was prepared to argue this out, and there was no real debate about the appropriateness of that particular approach.

STOURTON: Do you think people realised, as you obviously did, that America would respond in kind before they realised what they were signing up to.

GREENSTOCK: Yes I think so; they knew it would be inevitable. In fact, there was an expectation in the air that the Americans would launch something within 24 hours, and if you remember, that night in Afghanistan, the northern alliance threw some stuff at the Taliban in Kabul, and the sky was lit up with some weapons falling at night, it was on CNN at the time, and our first thought was blimey they've started within 18 hours, but it proved not to be the case, and the fact that that could have been the United States reacting didn't really get a murmur from around the international community here.

STOURTON: The next resolution or the more detailed was I think on the 28th of that month. What happened between the 9th and the 28th here, what kind of diplomatic activity was going on?

GREENSTOCK: Well there was I think an immediate focus on whether the United States was going to act under the resolutions that passed on 12th September, and then when we realised that the American response was going to be quite considered, there began to be a discussion of whether it would be possible to get a detailed resolution through the United Nations. Normally a smaller number than 15 members of the Security Council get together and exchange views on this, we, the French and the Americans were talking to each other the whole time. I remember talking to London about this, David Manning the prime minister's adviser on international and national security affairs, and I had a conversation on the telephone about whether it would in any sense be possible to get a hard resolution through the Security Council which didn't just condemn terrorism, but set up a whole global set of actions to deal with terrorism, and I said the mood is such here that I think you know this is possible, and he said are you sure? Won't there be a reaction from countries that normally watch the United

States very carefully and don't like to give it very much latitude? I said you should sense the mood in New York, the UN has become part of New York city over this, and I think if you're ever going to get something of this nature through, you're going to get it through now, and so he said right, give it a go, and then we learnt that the United States itself was drafting a set of measures, and we decided to see what they were going to propose, because, for once, this is not normally the case. For once the United States proposing something was probably going to gather support from around the UN system, and they eventually produced a draft which was very well judged. It stayed within areas that were already covered by the 12 UN conventions against terrorism, but introduced this remarkable new procedural innovation using the power of the Security Council to pass mandatory resolutions, that you take elements out of the conventions and put them into an immediate, immediate urgent requirement of all UN members to do something under chapter 7 of the UN charter, and they judged it very well, there was very little argument within the security council about the details of that. If anything the UK made as many drafting amendments as anybody, because we wanted to get it right against our law and against our asylum procedures and other things, and lo and behold, through it went.

STOURTON: Do you feel at all during that period that people at the United Nations felt they were in a way scrambling to keep up with the action, that the decisions that really mattered were being made down the road in Washington, certainly as far as military action goes, and the UN was sort of trying to keep up with the momentum?

GREENSTOCK: No, I think the US needed time to decide what it was going to do. The Bush speech took up a certain amount of energy in the days before the 20th of September. They wanted a bilateral discussion with the UK because we had come out first and we were liable to be the most useful to them in terms of a coalition to react to this, and they wanted to wait for Tony Blair's visit, so to some extent, we were waiting on the US, but in UN terms, knowing our limitations as most people here do, that the UN couldn't take action out there in the world, it doesn't have forces unless member states lend them to the UN, we realised that our job was to get the juridical stuff right and the global comprehensive collective reactions right, and therefore that was going to take time, and normally if you try to do something like this in the Security Council on a general subject, you would take months to stitch it together and negotiate. The fact that we did it in 16 days from the passage of the first resolution is absolutely remarkable in UN terms, and was evidence that the UN was completely on the ball on this issue, and that when there is consensus on something, you really can move the international community through several hoops of a remarkable nature in a short space of time.

STOURTON: Do you think that it was something with real teeth that, that could make a difference?

GREENSTOCK: Well that's a big question, but I think that time will tell whether resolution 1373 is going to make a real difference, but we've now had six months of the committee implementing that resolution being in place and I'm chairman of that committee at the moment, and people realise that we have already made a very considerable difference to the way that all member states regard their duties in counter terrorism under UN auspices; and there are two things you need to do when something like 11 September has happened in my view. One is get those who did it, and the

other is stop those who we don't know are out there, we can't identify, from doing anything like this again, so you go for those you can identify. But you've also got to go for those you can't identify, and to do the second of those, it has to be global, it has to be comprehensive, because even the United States with its great reach cannot just invade another sovereign territory in order to pre-empt terrorist activity that may one day hit them. If they can prove a self defence argument and say that we know that there is this cell in Somalia which doesn't have a government that controls the whole of Somali territory, and they're in there in a vacuum somewhere and nobody's going to deal with them unless we deal with them, and we know they're aimed at us and here is the evidence, then perhaps the UN would understand that that was self defence. But in order to make sure that money is not collected and passed to terrorists, that arms don't reach them, that cells don't talk to each other, that people don't cross borders to feed terrorist cells, to get all that together, you have to get every jurisdiction in the world co-operating, passing legislation that covers this, and getting their capacity up to a new level of effectiveness within their own jurisdictions, and only the UN can do that and I think that's what 1373 will in the end do.

STOURTON: How's it going at the moment and how many countries have told you what they're doing to your satisfaction?

GREENSTOCK: There are 189 countries in the UN, if you ask the whole membership to do something, to report on something and what are they doing on AIDS, what are they doing on child welfare or whatever, you might get a third responding. You're doing really well if you hit three figures. In six months, we've 143 reports out of the member states and one or two from, from the European Union and the organisation of security incorporation in Europe from Switzerland, which is not a member, so we've got 143, which is unprecedented in UN annals to get so many reports so quickly, and my job is to get 189, I will, I will get it before I finish.

STOURTON: Have you heard from the three countries on the axis of evil?

GREENSTOCK: Yes, all three of them were very careful to make sure that their noses were clean in this respect, we've heard from all three.

STOURTON: To your satisfaction?

GREENSTOCK: That's another matter, we have a team of experts with a knowledge of counter terrorism who are looking subjectively so that political judgements don't come into this, or don't come purely into this. Let me answer it this way, no state that's reported has reported entirely to our satisfaction. I've, as chair of the committee, have just written back to myself as UK permanent representative to the UK government to say a very interesting report but there are some things we need some further information on, we're not sure you've completed the job in this way, ditto the United States. Iraq, Iran, North Korea, in different ways, because they're not the same at all of course. There's a lot of work to do.

STOURTON: Quite soon after bombing began, people began to talk about peacekeeping forces. What sort of conversations were taking place here and was the possibility that there were UN helmets ever seriously considered?

GREENSTOCK: No, those of us who are thoroughly familiar with UN peacekeeping know that this is not a job for the United Nations. I would say that even now, as

we look at the next stage of the central authority in Afghanistan, which will renew itself into a different phase under the Bonn agreement in July. We know that, no UN peacekeeping force can look after the security arrangements in Afghanistan as it is at the moment; it's got to be a matter of multi national forces working together with real power and rules of engagement that allow them to fire if necessary. The UN peacekeeping function is really to police agreements between parties that are written down and fully subscribed to and need a more passive peacekeeping observer mission, with some military strength just to make sure that they don't get pushed around, but in the sharper circumstances of Afghanistan, as in the early days when East Timor came out of its violent period and the present situation and the past situation in the Balkans, it has to be more than the standard UN peacekeeping operation, so Kofi Annan was perfectly clear on this, it wouldn't be blue helmets.

STOURTON: You talked about the mood that led to the passing of both those resolutions, once the bombing began and went on with some concerns being expressed about how long it was going on and no apparent impact, did the mood or the signs of the mood change in here, of people becoming nervous about how long it was going on?

GREENSTOCK: Oh yes, this always happens. Remember Kosovo in 1999, which was a 10 week campaign and after eight weeks, it wasn't just the UN that was jittery, there was a lot of jitteriness within Europe, and after six weeks or so of the Afghan bombing campaign, when some civilians had been killed, there had been some stray bombs, there was jitteriness here, and indeed elsewhere, and then you know the sky suddenly cleared and the pack of cards collapsed, and the judgements were proved right in both the Kosovo and the Afghan instances. I always felt that if Milosovich had held out for another month or so, he, he might have seen us off. There was a certain amount of Russian diplomacy that undermined his morale, which was very important over and above the bombing, which was paradoxical because the Russians hated the bombing campaign, but they had no, nothing really to say to Milosovich. Ditto here, nobody was supporting the Taleban, if Pakistan was not going to support the Taleban then they had nowhere to go and therefore the feeling of the analysts that if you just go on pushing hard enough this is going to break apart very suddenly, proved to be right, and I think looking back on it, although you're quite right, it was a jittery phase, that will look as though it was the simple period, when there was a single thing we needed to do, or the Americans needed to do, get these people, get them out, deal with them, that is a much simpler objective and a simpler thing to do than to restitch together an Afghanistan that hasn't been a real Afghanistan for several decades now, to recreate a proper administration and get the warlords out of their habits and get the people working together again, that's a complex operation.

STOURTON: The General Assembly finally happened I think in November and George Bush made those comments about a Palestinian State that caused so much, or caught people's attention. How much difference did that make to the diplomatic climate?

GREENSTOCK: I think Palestine is a real sore in the international and UN system, and this April the interplay, the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis is overlaying everything at the UN, but the fact that he was prepared to make that move I think sustained the sympathy that people felt for the United States after 11 September. That speech to the general assembly, although it was very clear and very straight and included that element,

was still very Americacentric, which is the nature of most American administrations, and was noticed as such, he wasn't reaching out into some of the other areas where the majority of the UN member states would like to have seen some American action. I don't myself believe in poverty and, and deprivation and world inequalities being the root cause of terrorism, because the wish to murder comes from something else, whether it's murder or whether it's terrorism, to plop over from anger, resentment hatred into we must kill as many people as possible is not a factor of how poor you are, or how much you resent poverty. But the catchment area for that, the area of general support for hitting back at the big rich guys does come from all of that, and I think that the UN system is still looking for a response from the developed world in those areas. Bush gave no sign of that in November speech and that was commented on a little bit also. Nevertheless, he sustained the general area of support for the United States reaction in Afghanistan and the post 11 September reaction.

STOURTON: What happened to the diplomatic climate when he made his axis of evil comments?

GREENSTOCK: Well you've seen some of the comments from Europe and around the world on that, but I think we have to give the American administration credit for having thought this one very carefully through. We all know that it's not literally true that these three countries aren't working together on an axis. They aren't really similar to each other at all; I think the one that the Americans were and are really getting at is Iraq. Iran and, and North Korea are not the same threat at all, the point he was making was that these three countries have got to realise that we're focused on them. They are evil in some of the things that they're doing, and we are not going to stand for it, and it was a deliberate use of a controversial phrase to make people sit up and think, "Blimey, this administration is really gearing up; it's not going to stand for it". And if you look at what's happened since in the behaviour of each of those three countries, although they hated it and yelled against it and all the rest of it, they have changed their behaviour in certain ways, at least within diplomatic perception, if you watch them closely, they've done things which they wouldn't have done if that speech hadn't been made, so this was a carefully calculated use of a bald phrase, and, and I think they discounted some of the knee jerk reaction in advance.

STOURTON: But also a reminder surely of how difficult it will be to sustain what is called the coalition or the mood of unity that you experienced here in the next phase two of the war against terrorism?

GREENSTOCK: Not in itself in that speech, but I think there are some areas where the Americans may not be paying quite enough attention to the need to sustain a broad, global coalition behind what they're trying to do against terrorism, if they don't address some of these other things. I think Palestine is a leading issue in that category, although with Colin Powell now engaged in the Middle East, that has moved into a new phase, and coming back to some of the wider longer term global issues where there needs to be a stronger American input, in the view of many members of the United Nations, it's not necessarily a UK view, on the environment, on increasing overseas development aid, on opening up world trade for developing countries, I think a lot of people feel that the Americans need to think about these areas if they're going to sustain the sense of sympathy that they had after 11 September.

STOURTON: What's your verdict on the performance of the United Nations through the crisis, do you think it showed itself up to the task?

GREENSTOCK: Depends how you define the task. I've always been realistic about that. The UN's task was to make a moral judgement on what had happened, which it's very good at, to organise the global response amongst those who weren't going to take a national military response, and to organise the international community's political approach to Afghanistan, which was done exceedingly well through Lakta Brahimi, and the Bonn conference of the Afghan parties in leading up to a decision in December, which we the Brits, I have to say, looking back, were quite impatient about, we wanted them to get a move on you know, do you have to wait until they all come to Bonn, why don't you do something in Kabul to bring these people together, and Brahimi said well hang on, let's get this right you know, a few days here or there getting to the right decision. Brahimi was right, he was right to choose to do it in the way that he did and we acknowledged that after his success. I think the UN were as good on this issue on 11 September and on the rebuilding of Afghanistan as I've seen them in my experience of the UN in say, the last decade.

STOURTON: But in terms of what Kofi Annan said about them being uniquely well placed, that was his phrase, to coordinate the war against terrorism in the longer term, do you think that's realistic?

GREENSTOCK: I don't think he means it literally as a war against terrorism in terms of military or security sector action, but not only is the UN uniquely placed, there's no rival to it, there isn't any other global institution, and I think that what resolution 1373 has done, and what my committee, the counter terrorism committee of the UN security council, is doing, is irreplaceable in terms of global action against terrorism, and that is obliging every member state to contribute to that effort against terrorism, to snuff it out on every territory, because every state is sovereign in its own territory and without their contribution in their jurisdiction, you're going to have vacuums here and vacuums there which terrorism will eventually migrate to. And therefore I do think it's uniquely placed and I think it's indispensable.

STOURTON: Brilliant... thank you very much.