



World Chronicle

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UN 60th Anniversary Special

A conversation with Sir Brian Urquhart

As United Nations turns 60, a number of experts are contemplating its renewal, re-examining the entire architecture of the international system built up since 1945. The guest on this edition of World Chronicle, Sir Brian Urquhart, helped shape the United Nations from its earliest days.

Is it possible to re-ignite the “can-do” spirit of the early days at the United Nations? How did the Cold War affect the workings of the international system set up in 1945, and how has it changed since? To what extent can the Secretary-General chart an independent course in diplomacy? How has the growth of peacekeeping activities affected the work of the UN?

These are just some of the questions he addresses in this conversation with the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, Shashi Tharoor.

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ANNOUNCER: From the United Nations in New York, an interview programme on major global issues. This is **World Chronicle**. And here is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

THAROOR: Hello I'm Shashi Tharoor, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Public Information. This year the United Nations turns 60 – an age at which most UN officials contemplate retirement. But the UN isn't ready to be pensioned off. On the contrary, it is seizing this occasion to contemplate renewal, not retirement, and to re-examine the entire architecture of the international system built up since 1945. It's a crucial time for determining which path the world will take in the future. On the principle that the best crystal ball is a rearview mirror, I'm delighted to have as my guest in the studio a man whose work shaped the United Nations for more than forty years, and whose ideas continue to inform the debate over how best to renew the organization. Please join me for this conversation with Sir Brian Urquhart, on this special edition of World Chronicle. Welcome to the programme Brian.

URQUHART: Glad to be here Shashi.

THAROOR: We're talking about building up international systems since 1945 and you were there - at the founding in 1945 - the second ever employee of the United Nations. Tell us what it felt like. We know the UN came out of the ashes of World War II and all the horrors that had preceded it, but there was a mood of optimism – was there not?

URQUHART: Yes, there certainly was – perhaps over optimism. I'd just come from six years in the British army and I'd not really dealt with any civilians in my other life before – particularly not diplomats. And I must say, they were quite a surprise to me, and most of all I was impressed by the fact that they really thought that the Charter would absolutely work as it was written, comma by comma. And if one said anything to the contrary about this - particularly by the American delegation - you were told to please shut up. There was a...seriously there was a wonderful sense of purpose, of idealism, of realism. We've all been through a horrendous six years in one way or another. And the leader of course, was the United States – which had more or less originated the ideas in the Charter, and it was in fact the brainchild of Franklin

Roosevelt and they were the guide. The United States in 1945 was infinitely the most powerful country probably in history. It was the only nuclear power...it was the only major country which has been more or less unharmed internally by the war. And it had fortunately for everybody a visionary, extraordinary far-sighted view of what had happened. Roosevelt had started studying the post war order in 1939 already because he had been at the Treaty of Versailles, and wanted to avoid that kind of complete mess-up again. It was very exciting. We had to do everything: we had to move the furniture, write the documents, greet foreign ministers,

everything... wonderful. There was a very small staff – it was headed by Gladwyn Jebb, who was said to be very arrogant and I thought he was splendid. He was a remarkable British civil servant who knew the Charter...he had been a part of writing it, he knew the Charter backwards. Better than that, he had a very strong sense of idealism about the necessity of an organization which was an alternative to war, where nations tempted to go to war could come and sort it out, particularly the great powers.

THAROOR: Roosevelt himself mentioned that didn't he - in his famous speech to the two houses of Congress after Yalta, when he talked about an alternative to the balance of power, military...

URQUHART: ...Yes, and the military comes instead of military alliances, balances of power, and all the range of experiments which have always lead to disaster. Well of course it wasn't actually. What is interesting about 1945 is that I don't think anybody really foresaw the cold war; nobody foresaw the threats to the peace in three or four years time would be the relations between the 5 permanent members of the Security Council who were suppose to be the supreme guardians of the peace....

THAROOR: Right....and in fact if I can interrupt you right there, because I think what is interesting is...we have a clip from 1945 that confirms the point that you just made – that in fact, people did not foresee how things would go. Let's look at that clip right away.

VIDEO BEGINS:

NARRATION: Strong and effective machinery must guarantee that succeeding generations shall be spared such destruction. Therefore at San Francisco, the delegates of the United Nations took concrete steps to settle their disputes by peaceful means, to prevent threats to the peace, to suppress aggression, and pledge to place their armed forces at the disposal of the international organization. For speedy combined action, air forces will be held immediately available. Final responsibility is vested in the powerful Security Council, authorized to work swiftly and effectively with the aid of its military staff committee.

VIDEO ENDS:

THAROOR: When we listen to that, it's almost as if they all expected the armies, and navies and air forces of the world to be at the disposal of the Security Council, to impose a sort of *Pax Onusiana* around the world. And clearly that never was in the cards was it?

URQUHART: Well I don't know how far Roosevelt and Churchill and Stalin really believed that. They were after all the three who had most to do with the Charter. Maybe

Roosevelt did believe it. What he was intent on was the four policemen, the four policemen who would patrol the world – would allow the world to escape this appalling mess which it had just spent six years in. And I think that was very genuine. We even had in the military staff commission which was then known as the teeth of the Charter – though nobody has heard much of the teeth in the last fifty years I'm afraid – but this was composed of the chiefs of staff of the five...

THAROOR: ...Major powers...

URQUHART: ...These were the most powerful military officials in the world. And they were going to sort out not just dealing with threats of peace – but also disarmament. Disarmament was a major objective of the Charter. We don't even call it disarmament any more – it's called arms control – but they meant disarmament. So things changed in the years after 1945 very quickly.

THAROOR: Now you came in of course, into the staff of the Secretary-General, the first Secretary General – Trygve Lie – you came to New York and you were involved in some of the political and sort of peace and security work of the UN in those early days.

URQUHART: Well really not much. I mean I had obviously no qualification whatsoever to work in the UN, except that I spoke horrible French and German which wasn't any help. And that I was reasonably intelligent but I was lucky. I was the personal assistant to the first Secretary-General – Trygve Lie, and that in itself was quite a personal challenge as a matter of fact.

THAROOR: What was he like?

URQUHART: Well he was a very good man, but he was....somebody that would have never dreamed in his life he would have this job. The original candidates for the job were Lester Pearson of Canada, Anthony Eden, and General Eisenhower. So when we ended up with Trygve, it was kind of a bit of surprise for him I think. He did his level best. In those days the Secretary-General was suppose to be the Administrative Officer, and any incursion of politics except on a very tight rein was much discouraged. I think Trygve found that extremely frustrating. I think he should be remembered though as the person who turned the sort of Flying Dutchman regime of

the United Nations - where it went from place to place and it was haunted by its inhabitants. First to Lehman College in the Bronx, later on to the Gyroscope bomb factory in Long Island and so on...

THAROOR: Lake Success...

URQUHART: ...He was the person who actually got it pinned down to its present headquarters in New York.

THAROOR: Right...

URQUHART: ...And I think he should be remembered very gratefully for that. It was a very difficult thing to do but he did it, so there it was. It was a disappointing time because after the huge initial euphoria...almost about this organization, it was the top of the news in every paper in the world, it was extremely important. And people unfortunately believed it was going to settle everything and of course, it wasn't. We soon relapsed into the usual ding-dong struggle in the Security Council – first the United States accused the Russians of having troops in Azerbaijan and then the Russians accused the British of having troops in Burma, and the Dutch of having troops in Indonesia, and so it went – like a ping pong match. We very soon descended to the rather sad level....and I was disappointed, I had dreamed of an organization where great decisions, and great visions, and ideas would be put into action. And all one heard, was this endless robotic kind of dialogue and it was quite depressing, and I think the population found it quite depressing too. The gilt was off the rose rather soon and...

THAROOR: When would you date it? Because I think it was in '53 that Trygve handed over what he called the most impossible job in the world to Dag Hammarskjöld.

URQUHART: Well, for Trygve had a really terrible time because in 1950 because the Soviets sort of centered themselves in protest against the non seating of the People's Republic of China in the Security Council. They absented themselves from all meetings, something they never did again for a single second. And it allowed the United States to bring the invasion of South Korea by North Korea to the Council and get a decision under Chapter 7 to fight it, with troops. And this, Trygve, I think not only because he thought it was the right thing to do, but also because as Secretary-General he was really obliged to support the decisions of the Security Council – supported it very whole heartedly – where upon he was excommunicated by the Soviet Union, which then addressed all reference of the Secretary-General, they were just addressed to the Secretariat. And that was difficult enough, and on top

of that, he had the McCarthy period in the United States when everything went crazy and there was a huge witch hunt for American communists among the American members of the Secretariat. So that all our American colleagues were threatened all the time – I don't know who could have handled that well - he didn't handle that very skillfully, so the staff became extremely demoralized. And so the situation at the end of 1952 when he surprisingly resigned was pretty bad. Then a number of things happened, there was a search for a Secretary-General which lasted for about 5 months, in which all sorts of names were put up. I mean amazing names, but none of them were acceptable in one way or another. And finally Gladwyn Jebb, who knew probably more about the Charter and the prospects of the UN than anybody else other than the British ambassador and the French ambassador, suggested that they should put four names on a piece of paper, which everybody else on the Council agreed to and see if anyone of them would be acceptable to the Soviet Union. And Jebb had insisted on putting Hammarskjöld on it because he had worked with him on the funding - I think – of the OEC, and had been very impressed by him. And he turned out to be acceptable to the Security Council. Of course, there was a delightful misunderstanding here because looking at Hammarskjöld's record as a civil servant in Sweden, the Council I think, thought that he was an apolitical safe civil servant who wouldn't stray into the farther reaches of political matters, and they made a tremendous mistake. Hammarskjöld was a person with a great sense of mission, he was somebody who thought that the UN was not taking over the way it should, that the Charter was a document of enormous vital importance, and he became this kind of charismatic, extremely active international leader. And with a number of successes which were...he took on the most difficult subjects and quite often succeeded with them. So...

THAROOR: That brings us in a sense to the great innovation of Hammarskjöld's day - the peacekeeping, which you were so intimately involved with.

URQUHART: Hammarskjöld thought that if he just passed the Security Council resolution saying that they'd cancel, they hoped that people would stop fighting or something like that, that it wasn't really enough. That you had to do something about it, you had to make it possible for them to stop fighting and he also thought that – rightly I think - that the great danger which loomed over men, women and children for that forty years – that's hard to remember it now – was the possible thought of a nuclear war. I mean my children used to stay awake all night thinking about it and it was the great fear of everybody. Hammarskjöld thought

that regional conflicts mostly resulted from a decolonization progress where there was a disputed border or disputed authority or something, or just a power vacuum...

THAROOR: Could ignite...

URQUART: Could easily be the fuse that would ignite the great East-West nuclear conflict, which is perfectly true I think. And so he set about finding a means both by diplomacy of the Secretary-General and in practice, putting people actually on the ground to try to make it possible...I mean, very often countries fight because they are afraid the opposition at home will say that they were cowardly if they stop. I think it's a very common condition. And he invented peacekeeping as a pretext by which governments could perfectly, honorably, decide to do something sensible or either stop killing each other, and it wasn't called peacekeeping in those days but it was an unexpected success. And in those days, there was an additional importance to peacekeeping and to the Secretary-General, because there were occasions when he was virtually the one person in the world who could usefully deal in a really dangerous conflict involving nuclear powers. And the peacekeeping operations were completely objective and so they could be accepted by everybody. And I think it is something that doesn't exist now, but it was very important.

THAROOR: As Secretary-General of course, he established in many ways the ideal type of that role. Let's look briefly at another film clip from our archives, one that actually begins with a peek into the office of the Secretary-General – Dag Hammarskjöld.

VIDEO BEGINS:

NARRATION: We're at the top of the Secretariat building in the office of its Chief, the Secretary-General. The Secretary-General is rarely here while the General Assembly is in session, for his duties take him to many of the Assembly's meetings. In the General Assembly he sits at the Presidents side. He represents no single member country but the collective interest of all of them in a more peaceful world. Thus he has a unique contribution to make to the processes of international negotiation and the harmonizing of conflicting interests.

MEMBER CALLING

COUNTRIES NAMES: Soviet Union, United Kingdom, United States...

NARRATION: It's also his duty with his staff in the Secretariat to help carry out the work of the United Nations approved by the representatives of the nations. This work goes on – must go on – around the year and around the clock, in the workshop for peace

known as the United Nations. It's on this ceaseless work – often slow and unspectacular – that the world rests its hopes for a future of peace, progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.

VIDEO ENDS:

THAROOR: That was footage that I am sure brought back some memories to you...

URQUHART: Yes indeed...absolutely.

THAROOR: ...Because I imagine as a young man you walked into that office when it was exactly like that. Tell me...Hammarskjöld in a sense incarnates many people, the ideal Secretary-General. You've said he had a difficult time as well as, of course, leaving behind an extraordinary new developments in international affairs. He was also the first one I think, who's called – I've forgotten by whom – a secular pope for the world...

URQUHART: By himself, I believe...

THAROOR: By himself [both laugh]. Tell us about the role of the Secretary-General that he conceived and created for the rest...

URQUHART: Hammarskjöld actually said that he sometimes felt like a secular pope and almost always like a pope without a church. But anyhow, never mind that. Hammarskjöld I think in the first place was a tremendous student of the UN Charter. He knew it backwards, and he thought that it was actually an extremely important and useful document. Even in some ways if it was slightly out of date. He thought that the UN would make progress especially when everybody was scared stiff - when you had a war in the Middle East, that might become an East-West conflict, which happened two or three times actually – twice in his lifetime. And I think that he thought that the UN wasn't really an important peaceful organization if it couldn't do anything more than pass a resolution. And he was accepted – curiously enough very early on. There was a huge prejudice to begin with against the Secretary-General taking any part of politics and poor Trygve suffered a great deal from that one. Hammarskjöld right at the beginning did something that everybody thought was impossible, which was to get the 17 American air men who had come down in China during the Korean war and been condemned as spies by the Chinese courts, he got them out.

THAROOR: Yes...

URQUHART: ...And this was not a small thing because there was a tremendous row going on in Washington, and there were demands for nuclear strikes on the Chinese

mainland and that kind of thing. And the United States was deeply shocked that the Secretary-General would talk to communists I remember, but when he pointed out it was rather difficult to deal with people if you didn't talk to them - I think they were extremely impressed with what an independent person could do. Zhou Enlai was impressed with Hammarskjöld because the year before, he had publicly criticized the CIA - the United States CIA - overturning the government in Guatemala, the newly elected government they thought was too left wing. And which of course, the United States did a good deal of hard burning but...and General, I said "you know, it's quite clear that you aren't particularly a slave to any of these great powers including us, so I can talk to you". So when he showed the advantages of this, the United States with great wisdom accepted absolutely an independent Secretary-General with what they wanted. Even if they quite often disagreed with him, which I think was a very, very important step forward and one which we could do with a bit more now, incidentally. Hammarskjöld was an intellectual. He was a highly intellectual person which meant that he could analyze in his head a very complex situation like the Middle East at Suez for example; and figure out a whole number of steps that he could take, and alternatives if they got blocked, and how much effect they would have on different sides, and whether the opposition will be greater than the support, and so on. He could do this in his head and it meant the he was usually rather ahead of the game and surprise people a great deal by an ostensible knowledge of these sometimes quite arcane situations. He was also a very, very strong...he had a very strong personality – though he didn't look like it actually. He looked rather indecisive but he was extremely strong. If he thought something was right and was going to achieve the right results, he would do it. He was very strong on the word integrity - which applied not just to him but to also to other members of the Secretariat.

THAROOR: Right.

URQUHART: And he believed that the International civil service should have integrity and should be completely independent. A battle he had to fight at the end of his life with the Soviet Union of course. He also had – I think – a very interesting long term view of what the UN should become. He called it – I think the best definition of the UN ever – he called it, a venture in progress towards an international community living in peace under the laws of justice. Which sounds extremely simple, but it actually covers much of the whole thing. ...

THAROOR: It does.

URQUHART: ...And he thought that the UN was an experiment that was finding its way, it must make progress by case law – by setting a precedent for doing something new and then... for example, peacekeeping -it was not in the Charter, a completely new technique. Hammarskjöld spent an inordinate amount of time negotiating the status of force agreements with Nasser over the first peacekeeping operation at Suez. Everybody said what on earth are you doing wasting all this time when the world is... Hammarskjöld thought it was very important. We're doing something new here - we did it because nobody else could think of what to do....

THAROOR: We've got to get it right the first time.

URQUHART: ...Let's get a basis for it which will be legal. And then other people when they have to do this thing in the future won't have to go through all this again. And this is what he meant by precedent in case law – and he was right.

THAROOR: We seem to be running out of time unfortunately. How has the world changed and how has the UN changed since Hammarskjöld's day? Because a lot of these principles of course, have continued; peacekeeping is very much built on what Hammarskjöld had built up. But other things have changed.

URQUHART: Well I think basically the cold war has ended, so you don't have the driving incentive of global fear, which is what made both the Soviet Union and the United States back the Congo operation before it began. They just couldn't bear the idea of it developing into a conflict between the two. Of course, if the organization is more than twice as big now...

THAROOR: We have more peacekeeping operations than ever...

URQUHART: ...You have more peacekeeping operations, but they are not what we had. I mean our peacekeeping operations – except for the Congo - were all between two countries or even three sometimes.

THAROOR: Once ceasefire...

URQUHART: ...And dealing with governments was a great deal easier. Dealing with feuding tribe's movements, non-governmental people is terrible because they don't care about the UN, they don't care about international law and they're quite difficult to deal with or get hold of and I think it's a big change. And of course the UN Agenda now covers even more than it did then in terms of human rights, and development. Human rights was rather kind of

frozen during the cold war along with a lot of other things, and that's all become much more important now. So you have a much bigger economic and social agenda than you did before. But basically the problem is the same – the problem is whether you can have a central council on matters of peace and security, which is capable of taking decisions and making them stick. And I think the trouble with the Security Council even now is – that it has great difficulty in taking decisions on very important matters. I mean everybody said after Rwanda we'll never let this happen again but I am sorry to say that I don't think anything much hasn't changed.

THAROOR: We are a mirror of the world – aren't we? I mean the fact is, if governments don't have the political will to intervene, the Council can't invent that political will for them.

URQUHART: Exactly, that's why I get a little bit – I'm rung up a great deal now by well meaning people who ask whether I think the UN could be saved. I mean I think it is going to be extremely difficult to abolish the UN actually – I really do. I think nobody is quite so stupid as to do that. But what does seem to me is the thing about reform – it is rather one-sided. I mean, if you read Sadako Ogata's book...

THAROOR: The Turbulent Decade...

URQUHART: ...The Turbulent Decade, she really sticks it to the Security Council. It says this body of people really...you can't rely on it - it leaves you stuck with a terrible situation and doesn't give you any help. It's true. And I think if you're going to talk about reform, you really have to talk about humanitarian intervention, we have to talk about the feeling of collective decision in the Security Council – especially among the Permanent Members. And also how much they're prepared to put up to support the action that they are calling for?

THAROOR: Well we can go on forever. Unfortunately our time is up.... **URQUHART:** I'm sorry my time is almost up.

THAROOR: Would there be one change that you would point to that if you could raise a wand about the UN that you would like to see happen today in 2005?

URQUHART: Well I think the first would certainly be that the Security Council would regard certain situations as they were writing national policy and all the problems they have with each other. That would be a huge change. And I of course, have always thought that the UN would not come into its maturity until it has a small rapid deployment force of its own which can leave within 48 hours to wherever it is.

