



# World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

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## “THE UN: IRRELEVANT, INDISPENSABLE OR NEITHER?”

In Washington –and elsewhere -- the word “irrelevant” has accompanied many a discussion of the United Nations, especially in the context of the crisis over Iraq. But rarely have defenders of the United Nations been more adamant about the central role of the world body. What impact does the “relevance debate” have for the organization’s operations to help suffering civilians in conflict areas? Will it affect the UN’s effectiveness as the world’s forum for collective decision-making? For this very special 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of **World Chronicle**, the guest is one of the UN’s most eloquent defenders, Shashi Tharoor --- the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information.

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

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Hello, I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is a special 900<sup>th</sup> edition of World Chronicle. In Washington – and elsewhere -- the word “irrelevant” has accompanied many a discussion of the United Nations, especially in the context of the crisis over Iraq. A former UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, has gone as far as arguing that the UN should be replaced by a new generation of international organizations. And yet, rarely have there been more camera crews and journalists here at the UN and rarely have defenders of the United Nations been more adamant about the central role of the world body. Our guest today, for this very special anniversary edition of **World Chronicle**, is one of the UN's most eloquent defenders, Shashi Tharoor -- the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information. Joining us in the studio are Corinne Lesnes of *Le Monde* and Greg Barrow of the *BBC*. Mr. Tharoor, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

**THAROOR:** Good to be with you Michael on this special occasion.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Thank you, Mr. Tharoor. The word irrelevant was bandied around quite a bit by President Bush. It might be argued I suppose that if the UN were so irrelevant people wouldn't have been knocking themselves out to obtain the blessing of the Security Council for the operation in Iraq. What is your take on this whole business of relevance, irrelevance, the indispensable nature of the UN? Indispensable is another word that ...

**THAROOR:** Absolutely.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Let's hear a bit about your thoughts.

**THAROOR:** Well, I guess the question is very irrelevant to what. Certainly I remember a BBC interviewer -- fortunately it wasn't Greg so I don't have to shoot at daggers at him -- asking me point blank “What do you think about this ‘i’ word, irrelevant and that applies to all of you?” And I said, “The ‘i’ word that applies is really indispensable”, and that's really my argument. And I think that the United Nations truly cannot be replaced for a number of vital things around the world. But to come back to the question of irrelevance, the argument is that somehow Iraq demonstrated our irrelevance because of the Security Council's failure to come to a decision on how to implement its 17 previous resolutions, and then the resulting action by the US and the UK to go to war meant that the Organization had condemned itself to irrelevance. And I think that is simply not reasonable first of all because the relevance of the United Nations doesn't rise or fall on any one issue, however important. Iraq is important and God knows we all would have liked to see the Council united one way or the other on this issue rather than divided, but the very same Council that was disagreeing on Iraq was spending the same eight weeks agreeing on a whole host of other issues on peace and security: Cyprus, Cote d'Ivoire, Congo, Guinea Bissau, whatever. And, of course, the UN goes beyond peace and security. The UN is still the one indispensable global

organization in our globalizing world dealing with all the problems that Kofi Annan likes to call “problems without passports”. Problems of human rights, of terrorism, of refugee movements, of climate change, drug abuse, poverty, the deadly confluence of AIDS and famine and drought that we know is assailing Southern Africa these days. Even the most recent story of the outbreak of SARS, it is a UN agency, WHO, that is out there trying to nip it in the bud before it comes and infects larger swathes of the world. So here you’ve got an organization very much on the frontlines, on the cutting edge of the issues that are relevant to a whole lot of people around the world. So we might be irrelevant to the war in Iraq but we are relevant to a heck of a lot of other things that have to do with real problems that real human beings have to live with.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Corinne, staying with the question of Iraq, France was of course blamed for blocking a second Security Council resolution by threatening to use its veto. Would you like to follow up on that?

**LESNES:** Yes. Some people have been thinking actually that of course the US maybe was endangering the UN but also France was playing with the UN’s relevance a little bit because France also was saying they are working for the UN. And what do you think about that?

**THAROOR:** Well I think that France articulated its position very much in terms of upholding certain principles of international order. What’s interesting is that the US too framed its actions in terms not of US national interest but in terms of implementation of UN Security Council resolutions. So what you saw in the Council really was a debate -- or a disagreement to put it bluntly – about how best to uphold the UN’s role in the world. The US position was the UN’s credibility would suffer if it didn’t take or authorize firm action to implement its old resolutions. France’s position, backed by the Russians, the Germans and others, was that the UN’s credibility would suffer if it didn’t uphold the principle of a peaceful resolution of this dispute and instead allowed war to happen. Both those, I think, in their own terms were valid expressions of what the United Nations is all about. Ideally, from the point of view of the Secretary-General, the Organization would have benefited if all 15 members, or a good majority, had agreed on one interpretation or the other. In the end their failure to agree is what led to some of this negativism. I think the fact that, you know, on one issue in the last four years we’ve had a disagreement shouldn’t somehow condemn us all to breast beating. I mean, since Kosovo in 1999, the last time the Council did not agree on an issue of peace and security, they have agreed consistently on every other problem that’s come before them. So why should we make too much of this?

**BARROW:** Shashi, I wonder if I could ask you – I mean this question is always addressed to the United Nations -- is the UN still relevant? Shouldn't it really be a question that you are addressing to the United States in this day and age, them being the over-arching hyper powers some French diplomats have chosen to call them? Isn't it them who are going to decide whether you're irrelevant or not and whether you say you're relevant or not is neither here nor there in this day and age?

**THAROOR:** Oh, I think Greg that is a little bit unfair because of course the US is a vital member but it is one member out of 15 on the Council and another of 191 in the General Assembly. And though it is our most important contributor – it is supposed to pay, as you know, 22% of the regular budget and a bit more for peacekeeping; it is one of the five countries with a veto on the Council – it needs the UN as much as the UN needs it. Why do I say that? I'll give you one example. We all know what happened just less than a couple of years ago when 9/11 occurred in the United States, this horrendous tragedy that shook all of us, when *Le Monde* was proclaiming “we are all Americans now”. And certainly we as an Organization based in the city I think felt it very keenly. But before the end of that month the US had come back to the Security Council and passed two Security Council resolutions that have since constituted the international framework for the global battle against terrorism. Those resolutions are what obliged member states around the world to provide compulsorily, under Chapter 7 of the Charter, information about financial transfers, weapons flows, movements of suspected terrorists, freeze their bank accounts, change their national legislation in this area, all of which is something the US could not have obtained without a UN Security Council resolution, or in this case two. Otherwise, how do you achieve the same objective? You do it retail. You go and create conventions and treaties. You get as many countries as possible to sign on then they have to ratify them. And we've been that route. We have got 12 conventions and treaties, none of which has the universality that the Security Council resolution adopted in September 2001 does. Now, there is a good example of why, from the point of view of the US, it is not only relevant but essential to come to the UN to pursue even the US's own national and international interests.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** But Shashi, a lot of people in Congress don't see it that way and they feel that the United States is a super power that can essentially go off and do things on its own without paying any attention to the international community, or at least not very much. But supposing that the United States, God forbid, should withdraw from the UN, could the UN survive?

**THAROOR:** That's a very difficult question to answer because of course we all remember that one of the great failings of the League of the Nations was that by the 1930's

two of the three big powers in the world of the time – the US and Germany – did not belong and the US never belonged, and the failure of that organization to achieve the universality that the UN has crippled it because it couldn't influence the actions of these powers since these powers didn't belong. Therefore, yes, there is a real concern that if this Organization lost the universality that is very much its strongest suit that it would suffer perhaps irreparable damage. But I would suggest in all respect, Michael, that the trend has actually been in the opposite direction. It's just last year that the fiercely nationalistic Swiss passed a referendum in which after, what is it, 57 years since the UN was founded? they decided to join. In other words, they decided that it was no longer possible to be an effective player on the world stage without belonging to the United Nations. And a club which attracts every single eligible member can hardly be called irrelevant or even in danger of irrelevance.

**BARROW:** I just wonder how the UN would cope, not if the United States withdrew but if the United States operated on the basis that it would come to the United Nations like a shop and buy what it wanted when it saw that there could be international agreement and consensus and on those issues like Iraq, where so much more is at stake, it just sidesteps the Organization and does what it has done this time? How damaging would that be?

**THAROOR:** You are suggesting that instead of the United Nations à la Charte, it will be United Nations à la carte. Yes, I suppose there is always a risk that a big power would want sometimes to come to the UN only when it suited its own interest to do so. In all fairness, however, that has pretty much always been the case and it hasn't crippled the Organization. If you look back over the last 58 years of our existence you will find a whole lot of occasions in which not just the big powers but even smaller powers, medium powers, regional powers have decided that on certain issues that they felt involved their immediate direct national interest or that affected their own immediate backyard they would act without the UN. My own country, India, has gone to war three times without coming to the UN. We have seen that France has taken certain actions without coming to the UN. And that applies I would say to God knows 20, 30, 40 countries around the world in these last years. The difficulty with the US is that its own backyard is so large, because it's a truly global power, that you do have a larger number of cases in which it might exercise that option. I am not saying that it is a good thing. I am just saying that that has been a fact of life. But I do want if I may to make two points. The first is that that doesn't matter – national security and self-defence having in a sense been provided for already in the Charter -- provided that on issues of international peace and security that there is no consensus possible. And the very fact that we've had over 50 peacekeeping operations around the world suggests that there are enough issues on which there is consensus that the UN needs to be involved and on which

the big powers do not block the UN from acting. So that, I think, is one very important thing. And the second thing is the value of an institution is tested as much by the ways in which it is applied as by the occasions in which it is bypassed. I think we are conducting a rather serious fallacy in saying that if the UN is bypassed in Iraq that that somehow diminishes its utility when we are not looking at the various other issues around the world in which the UN is being used. And I'd even parse that a bit further. Let's go back to the Kosovo example I mentioned. Four years ago NATO bombed Yugoslavia over Kosovo without coming to the Security Council. And indeed we heard the same reference as to UN's irrelevance, UN being bypassed, the super powers will do what they want to, et cetera. What happened at the end of that? They came back to the UN and they came back to the UN both for a resolution that would give them international legitimacy for the arrangements that followed the war, that gave NATO the legal authority to continue running security and law and order there, and they'd actually asked the United Nations to run the civil administration. Now I am not suggesting that it is what's going to happen in Iraq, but it makes the point that it would not be the first time that the United Nations has been deemed irrelevant to a war but has turned out to be extremely relevant to the ensuing peace.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Shashi Tharoor, the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information.

Mr. Tharoor, the question of the UN's relevance and its efficacy in solving global problems has been taken up many times in the 23 years of this television programme. For this 900<sup>th</sup> edition, we thought it would be fun to look back at some of the things that have been said on this show in years past. Let's look at the tape:

**PALME:** If we were to admit failure because we haven't solved all the problems which come to this Organization, I think we should go out of business. We get problems when nobody else can solve them.

**ROMULO:** The United Nations has no power. All it has is moral influence.

**BLIX:** An international organization is an instrument for the interaction of governments. It's like a club in which you are a member and you have set it up to achieve joint objectives. Of course, the members can determine at any time whether the club is still one way which is useful to achieve the objectives which they have set.

**PEREZ DE CUELLAR:** I think that the prevention of conflict is something really indispensable for the United Nations.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** With respect, you haven't been very successful in preventing conflicts.

**DERGHAM:** It says that the US cannot resolve the conflicts of the world but does not believe that the UN is capable of making and keeping peace, particularly when hostilities still exist.

**ANNAN:** It is a statement of fact following a realistic assessment when we look at the two difficult operations like Somalia and Bosnia.

**PRENDERGAST:** So we are switching attack all together to the question of whether the UN is relevant or not. Well, look, the UN is the world's largest standing conference, isn't it? It's what the member states say they want.

**ANNAN:** The United Nations, that is made up of the Secretariat, the humble civil servants who follow through the decisions and guidance given by the member states who take the decisions, who give us a mandate in situations like Rwanda and also have to provide the resources to do it. So we can be as effective and as strong as the member states want us to be.

**MANDELA:** We would benefit a great deal from the monitoring of the elections by the United Nations. It has got very experienced, capable people who have got the skills and the expertise and who are very much aware of the objectives of the world organization as an important agency for the promotion of peace in the whole world.

**NAYAAR:** In the past 25 years, the United Nations has lost some of its effectiveness and some of its credibility as an institution in part because it is characterized by a democratic deficit, implicit in the nature of the Security Council, in the right to veto that is available to permanent members and in part because it seemed to serve the interests of the rich and the powerful. Now, I think both of these things need correction. The world has changed.

**JENKINS:** It is interesting to me that you didn't actually offer an argument that it seems to me can be offered, which is to say, yes, the world does have just one super power. We need to accept it and get on with it.

**KAVAN:** But as President of the General Assembly of the United Nations I have to represent the majority view of member states. And one can take what you said, which I do not question, to the extreme which, if taken at that, you would not need multilateral organizations like the United Nations if all decisions would be taken by super powers. Now, that I do not believe in. I am a strong believer in diplomacy, in multilateral organizations, in the world's parliament.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Kofi Annan was one of the persons who was interviewed in that tape and at the time he was the Under-Secretary-General in charge of peacekeeping operations. He has made some remarks apropos of the Iraq situation. He referred, for example, to the

United States forces as occupying powers and that caused a bit of distress in Washington. Is he getting any flack from the United States because of his independence?

**THAROOR:** He has had some public flack but our position is that he was simply mentioning a statement of fact. I mean the Geneva Convention is fairly clear. You know, when you are fighting you are called a belligerent power – it doesn't sound nice but that is simply the term of art – and when you have won you are the occupying power. And that is pretty much all he was trying to convey. It wasn't a pejorative term. It was really what the term is. But, yes, we've had some flack and the fact is the Secretary-General has had to develop a fairly thick skin over the years. Over Iraq, he's been attacked by those who felt he was too tough on the US and attacked by those who felt he wasn't tough enough on the US and at some point you are going to have to say that if you are being attacked from both sides you are probably walking the fine middle.

**LESNES:** You sound pretty optimistic but when you talk to people here in this house some are not as upbeat, so how are you concerned about this debate about irrelevance? Is it taking its toll on people's work, people's mood here in the UN?

**THAROOR:** People's work, no, I don't think so. People's mood, yes, perhaps. I mean there have certainly been a lot, as we know, in the American press certainly suggesting that this administration has decided that the UN is not going to serve all the purposes it would like it to serve and therefore as an article in *The New York Times* magazine said a few weeks ago, that if the UN thought that things were tough or things were bad over Iraq, wait until they see the next issue – "The Next Resolution", I think, the article was entitled. I don't buy that extreme scenario myself largely because I believe even on Iraq there are constructive conversations going on as we speak right now and that the US will see why it is useful to come back to the United Nations. I mean look at the situation in Iraq. You've got sanctions imposed, you've got the Compensation Commission, the inspectors, the peacekeeping operation's that supposed to exist, the oil-for-food programme. All of these are valid Security Council resolutions that remain valid until the Council takes action to modify or repeal them. How can the US avoid having to interact with the Council in order to persuade others on respectable modification of these resolutions? It is impossible under international law to do otherwise and therefore I do believe they will come back. Frankly it's not that I am optimistic in the classic sense. I tend to define optimism as regarding the future with uncertainty. A pessimist is convinced that everything is immediately going to go bad and can't be retrieved. An optimist says things might go right. And I believe there are enough reasons to believe that things will go right and that this organization will again retain that sense of indispensability, which I think the universal membership believes it has.



**BARROW:** Shashi, I wondered if we could step back again to that issue of the role of the Secretary-General. And one thing that puzzles me, as it puzzles many of my listeners and viewers as a broadcaster here, is why he wasn't more outspoken in the run up to this particular conflict in Iraq? The fact of the matter was that here was somebody who is in their second term. He is not going to need the support of the United States for a third term because that is not going to happen. Why did he not speak out? Is that because he has the long-term views, a position of the United Nations at heart, or he just felt it was inappropriate at that time?

**LITTLEJOHNS:** And it might be added that contrary to all the evidence he evidently didn't feel there was going to be a war.

**THAROOR:** Well, let me not address that point right now because that could take us I think into a longer debate. But on the question of speaking out, I think it's a fallacy to assume that the Secretary-General must always be outspoken on every key issue. He does have a bully pulpit and that is an important and effective tool that he uses very often to articulate the voice of the world at large on very many issues. And he has done that I think on a whole host of issues as we all know which is why he is such a well-known figure in the world of media. But there's also a great deal a Secretary-General accomplishes without speaking out publicly and that he does usually through quiet and persuasive diplomacy, through the phone calls that are made behind closed doors, towards the meetings that are held behind closed doors. This is something that Kofi Annan is very good at. I mean, fortunately for him, he is good at both the public kinds of diplomacy and the private kinds of diplomacy and that does mean that sometimes on the public diplomacy he is not seen and people say is he AWOL? Is he absent from the scene? He has not been absent but don't forget he was working in a situation in which the membership was divided. It's much easier to speak for a set of principles or a cause or an issue on which the broad opinion of the world is behind you. In a particular issue where a key member sees things differently and other members see it a different way, you have to work carefully. And I believe he has done that rather well in the interests, as your question put it, of the larger longer-term viability of the institution as a whole. You know, there is a marvellous old Ghanaian proverb he once told me years ago when I worked with him in peacekeeping, which I have never forgotten, about precisely the dangers of outspokenness in certain situations. He said, "You know, in Ghana there's a proverb that you don't hit a man on the head when you have got your fingers between his teeth". And that I think is an extremely useful way of looking at it. The Secretary-General has his fingers between the teeth of many of the world's most important member states. He has to work with them and he has to work with them on other issues as well, not just the issues on which he is tempted to hit them on the head with. **LESNES:**

Yes, that is a question that people have been actually wondering about. So what would you recommend to those people? Do you think the battle for the third resolution will be -- the relevance will be at stake again or you would recommend anything to the Security Council members in terms of promoting the UN?

**THAROOR:** Well, I think the Council members are all anxious to put behind them the recrimination and divisiveness we saw in February and March, or January, February and March. And I think there is a desire to say, "Look, what happened then has happened, and it's over. The war happened, the coalition won, and let's make sure that the Iraqi people win the peace." And that means looking forward in a constructive way trying to find the specific areas in which agreement is possible. For example, all member states agree that sanctions need to be lifted. What they haven't yet agreed on are the modalities. What are the terms and conditions? What are the elements that need to be put into a resolution? These are the kinds of things they are talking about now and I for one would be both surprised and disappointed if they don't find, a *via media*, some way of reconciling the different sets of concerns around the formal resolution that both restores legality to the overall situation concerning Iraq and puts the UN back in its rightful place as the organization responsible for international peace and security.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Does the UN feel vindicated in a way that no weapons of mass destruction have been uncovered so far?

**THAROOR:** It is too early to tell, isn't it, whether they are going to find them or not. I mean they are still looking. I would say that the UN's position has not been either that there will or will not be weapons of mass destruction. The UN's position has been if there are, let's find them and let's verify them through an independent international inspection process. That remains the Secretary-General's position. Of course, if the Council were to change that arrangement the Secretary-General will accept that and in these areas it is very much the Council's domain and not his own. But we will certainly, until the Council modifies that resolution, continue to remind the world that we have a mandate for UNMOVIC to go out and verify whether Iraq is indeed free of weapons of mass destruction.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** With or without Hans Blix?

**THAROOR:** Well, Hans Blix has made it clear that he does not wish to renew his contract which expires next month, and it is entirely possible that of course that will mean that he may not be the one going, but he has always said that the issue is far more important than the individual.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** We have only a few seconds left. I just would like to ask you a question about the crumbling headquarters. The UN has decided that it's going to take about

a billion dollars to reconstruct this falling down place. Do you think the United States, given the present climate, will come up with some of that cash?

**THAROOR:** Well, hope had been on the part of member states that the US would provide an interest-free loan to renovate the building just as they provided such a loan to build the building. And, of course, it would be repaid over the years by member states. If that doesn't happen we believe that there could be other creative financial solutions found. It's essential in any case that something be done because indeed there is a great danger that this building will be a threat to the health of those who work in it.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Mr. Tharoor, that is all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of World Chronicle. Our guest has been Shashi Tharoor, the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information. He was interviewed by Corinne Lesnes of *Le Monde*, and Greg Barrow of the *BBC*.

I am Michael Littlejohns, thank you for being with us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition, the 901<sup>st</sup>, of **World Chronicle**.

**ANNOUNCER:** Electronic transcripts of this programme may be obtained free of charge by contacting World Chronicle at the address on this screen:

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