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TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE BY SECRETARY-GENERAL KOFI ANNAN

AT UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS, 21 DECEMBER 2004

The Secretary-General: Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are coming to the end of a year of opportunities and difficulties for the United Nations. Our global mission has advanced on many fronts. But the allegations over the “oil-for-food” programme have cast a shadow over an operation that brought relief to millions of Iraqis. We must find out the truth as quickly as possible. I am pleased that the independent commission headed by Mr. Volcker has promised an interim report by the end of January, and that he anticipates the release, at the same time, of internal audit reports to all Member States. I intend to make his interim report public and act on its findings.

As I look to the year ahead, I see important openings for peace.

We have had very successful elections in Afghanistan -- the culmination of a three-year transition within a UN framework. But the job is far from done. The United Nations is now assisting preparations for parliamentary elections in 2005. We will work with Member States and the Afghan people as they try to improve security and address the huge drug problem.

The forthcoming Iraqi elections are being run by the Independent Electoral Commission. The UN has helped Iraqis establish the Commission, draft the legislative framework for elections, create voter lists, train some 6,000 temporary electoral workers, open more than 450 registration centres, and we have begun training up to 130,000 poll workers. The technical preparations are on track, and I hope all Iraqis will exercise their right to vote. The UN is also looking beyond the elections. We stand ready, if asked, to help Iraqis as they draw up a new constitution and conduct a national referendum and further elections.

The United Nations will also support Palestinian elections early next year. We have an important opportunity for progress in 2005 towards the Middle East peace process, and the UN stands ready to advance the peace process through the Quartet.

A word on the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In the DRC, the Transitional Government has overcome some important challenges, with the help of the United Nations. But there must be a sustained effort to bring the whole country and the population together -- particularly in Eastern Congo, where conflict continues. It is also important to improve relations between the DRC and its neighbours. Peace in the DRC, as we all know, is crucial to stability in the entire continent.

In Sudan, the North-South peace accord must be concluded, and the momentum used to promote peace throughout the country. In Darfur, the security situation is deteriorating. The government and the rebels must cease attacks and abide by their commitments. We need improved security and protection for the internally displaced in Darfur, and more humanitarian aid. The deployment of the African Union monitors, troops and police needs to be speeded up, and the international community must give the commission all possible assistance. And, ultimately, the Security Council must assume its responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.

In the year ahead, we also have an opportunity to build a framework for a more secure world. The report of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change lays out a powerful vision of collective security and calls for sweeping changes of the United Nations. I am heartened by the reaction in many capitals. I look forward to a profound debate and real action on the report's recommendations.

Many of the most important decisions need to be taken next September at a Summit here in New York, when world leaders review progress since the adoption of the Millennium Declaration. That will also be the time for bold decisions on ways to reach the Millennium Development Goals by the target date of 2015 -- from halving poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS. In March, I will be putting to Member States my own views on the way ahead.

In the period ahead, Member States must work together to build a shared global framework for collective security in the twenty-first century, and forge a true global partnership for development. I will be working to help them do so, through a renewed United Nations.

I will be glad to take your questions.

Question: On behalf of the United Nations Correspondents' Association, allow me first to wish you happy holidays, just in case you don't feel like reciprocating by the end of this press conference. It seems to me that it might be fair to say that this has been your toughest year. You have been Secretary-General for eight years. Would you agree that it has been your toughest year? And, if so, do you believe in part the reason might be that there is an organized campaign in Washington by neo-Conservatives targeting you, to get rid of you? And are there any circumstances under which you could foresee resigning?

The Secretary-General: There is no doubt that this has been a particularly difficult year, and I am relieved that this *annus horribilis* is coming to an end. There has been lots of criticism against the UN, particularly focusing on the allegations surrounding the oil-for-food. These are serious allegations. We take them seriously, and this is why we are doing everything we can to get to the bottom of this. I know that certain quarters have been quite persistent in attacking the UN and me, but there have also been some constructive criticisms, which we accept.

On the question of my resignation, let me say that I have quite a lot of work to do. You have also indicated that I have the confidence and the support of the Member States, and we are going ahead to carry through this important programme that I have laid out for the reform and press ahead with the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals.

Question: Do you believe that this criticism that has been coming to you is related in any way to the stance that you took on Iraq, when you called it illegal, the letters you wrote warning about Falluja; and do you believe that this is a crucial part of the Secretary-General's job, or do you believe, as some quarters have said, that you should not be commenting on these matters?

The Secretary-General: I think the Secretary-General, one, has to not only follow events around the world and events that have an important impact on questions of peace and security, but I think the Secretary-General also does have the responsibility to comment and have his views heard. And often I do this in the spirit of trying to help move the process ahead or to express concern about developments that I see, and in most cases also to help the Member States come together and build a consensus to move forward. And I think that is part of the role of the Secretary-General. I also accept that Member States may not always agree with what the Secretary-General says.

Question: You have been to Washington since the calls for your resignation from some members of the United States Congress, and you have spoken to Secretary of State Powell and the Secretary of State-designate, Condoleezza Rice. I have two questions. One is, are you convinced now that the United States Government, the Bush Administration, does not want you to resign? And secondly, to comment on Tony Jenkins' question, one circumstance, if the United States Government called you, if President Bush or Secretary of State Rice were to call you and say, we can no longer work with you, would you then resign?

The Secretary-General: Let me say that yes, I did have very good and constructive discussions in Washington. The question of resignation did not come up, and we did talk about our plans for the future and the issues that we are working on together, from Iraq to Afghanistan to the Middle East to UN reform, and so we were looking forward.

On your second question, it is a bit speculative, and I prefer not to get into that now. And I don't see that we are getting in that direction.

Question: Sir, as we inch closer to the Iraqi election, there's quite a bit being said here in the United States in the media and punditry circles about the break-up of Iraq as a prescription for dealing with that situation. Do you subscribe to that prescription?

And, as a second question, you said earlier that the United Nations is looking beyond the election in Iraq. As the Iraqi army assumes a greater role in the internal security of Iraq, what sort of political system do you envisage will emerge in Iraq? Are you looking at the Turkish system, where the army plays a crucial role from a distance, or, rather, at the Algerian system, where the army controls the political life very closely, or are you looking at a third model that you could suggest?

The Secretary-General: Let me start with your first question. I think that, throughout the discussions in this building and the resolutions of the Security Council, it has been made clear that they would want to ensure the territorial integrity of Iraq, and we have all been working on the basis that you are going to have a unitary State, an Iraq that is united and at peace with itself and with its neighbours. Obviously, one cannot predict what the future holds, but we are not working towards the break-up of Iraq. We are working on the basis that Iraq will stay together, and my sense is that most of the neighbours and most people around the world would want to see an Iraq that is reconciled, an Iraq in which the various groups dialogue together and learn to live together, as they had in the past.

On the question of the Iraqi army and its role in future Iraq, I think that this is a very difficult question for me to answer at this stage. First of all, we are waiting for the Iraqi Government to draw up a constitution, write up a new constitution after this election, and we will work with them to put it to a referendum and then have a second election.

I do not know what is going to be in that constitution, how it is going to be crafted and how the Iraqis would want to organize their society for the future. I do not know what role and standing the army would have in the future Iraq. But my hope is that, if the developments go the way they are going and that the civilians are going to have a bigger political say and the army will report to civilian authority, then I think the two models that you are indicating may not be the models that they would use. They may need to prepare another model, which I am not able to define now because they are in the process of working this out themselves.

Question: How would you characterize Member States' willingness to help in a place like Darfur? And, furthermore, the High-Level Panel report and hundred recommendations, what are your personal priorities on that?

The Secretary-General: I think on Darfur we have heard lots of good intentions from Member States. Some have been very generous in providing assistance on the humanitarian side. Others have given assistance to the African Union to allow them to deploy their troops quickly. As I have indicated, we need faster deployment of these forces, and they need additional help from the Member States. But I have also made it clear in my statement here that while the African Union has agreed to send in monitors, troops and police, if additional support is needed and additional action is needed, the Council has to assume its responsibility. After all, it has the ultimate primary responsibility for international peace and security. We are monitoring the situation carefully, and I am sure they are also doing that.

On the question of the reform and the hundred and one proposals which have been put forward, I am not sure I want to indicate which are my preferences at this stage. We have asked the Member States to begin discussing it among themselves, particularly during the months of January and February, and I will give them my views in March. So, I would want to wait until then.

Question (interpretation from French): The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) has indicated that some members of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are responsible for sexual harassment. Is the head of UNHCR still responsible and capable of the post? There have also been a number of charges levelled against blue helmets concerning sexual abuse. How can you reassure people in Africa that this kind of thing will not happen?

The Secretary-General (interpretation from French): Indeed, there have been accusations. There has been an inquiry. And we stated our view that Mr. Lubbers is working as the High Commissioner for Refugees. He works very closely with the other members of his team, and I believe that he will continue to do his job properly.

With regard to the situation in the Congo, it is a situation that does cause me great concern. We have already dispatched some people there, including military personnel. I believe that there is another individual being detained in his country. There was an OIOS inquiry, and the report will come out very soon. There is a second team that I have sent to the field, working with United Nations troops and with my Special Representative. But we are not going to leave it there. We are now preparing a plan which will enable us to control this kind of situation. I had a meeting with 19 States that have contributed troops to this United Nations operation to discuss this kind of problem: how can we discipline troops and how can we prevent this kind of situation from arising and really tackle the matter in depth? I hope that with all those efforts we will be able to improve the situation. I am really shocked by these accusations in the Congo.

Question (interpretation from French): Do you trust Mr. Lubbers?

The Secretary-General (interpretation from French): As I just said, I think he's doing very good work.

Question: Another question about the relationship between the United States and the United Nations. It seems that there has been, obviously, an unusual amount of criticism in the United States. And, in fact, there has been a criticism within the United Nations of the United States. Your son was quoted recently as saying that he sees a Republican witch hunt. How much of this back-and-forth do you see as normal, simply a healthy debate? To what extent do you see it as a troubling phenomenon on the right wing of the United States? Or do you see this as symptomatic of maybe a deterioration in the United States-United Nations relationship that has potentially long-term ramifications?

The Secretary-General: Let me say that the United Nations and the United States have gone through tense periods periodically. We have had good relations with the United States Administration, and we have worked well together on many issues. The United States needs the United Nations, and the United Nations needs the United States. And we need to find a way of working together. The current criticisms and attacks have not been helpful for the relationship, regardless of which quarter it comes from, and we need to find a way of putting those kinds of acrimonious discussions behind us and move on. We have a very important agenda to tackle for the next two years or so, and I think it is important that everybody focuses on that. And I hope that the Volker report, when it comes out, would also help clear the air. After that, I hope that we will all calm down and focus on the essential task we have ahead of us.

Question: The United Nations reform panel has reported to you, and they have suggested many changes in the United Nations Security Council's formation. The G-4 nations -- meaning thereby Japan, India, Brazil and Germany -- are very actively pursuing it. The African nations, seemingly, are being totally sidelined. In your estimation, without Africa being adequately represented and Europe being inordinately represented, what is the solution?

The Secretary-General: I think that the proposal that the Panel has put forward -- both alternatives are intended to improve representation in the Council to make the Council more representative and more democratic, and it did look at the various regional representations. And when you look at the structure of either option one or two, the intention is to improve representation. Yes, at this stage, some countries have been very active on the Security Council reform, but let me remind everyone that the Panel's proposals are much wider than Security

Council reform. There are policy issues, there are institutional strengthening issues and a whole range of issues dealing with the economic aspects or economic threats to human security. So, I hope we will focus on the whole range of issues, not just Security Council reform. The fact that you have not heard from some regions, like Africa, does not mean that they are sidelined or silent. It indicates that the debate has not really been engaged yet. And I think that the next couple of months are going to be the crucial ones.

Question: On the subject of the oil-for-food programme, most of us who have been here a while know sort of the differentiation of the different responsibilities the Security Council had and that the Secretariat had. In that regard, looking back now on what we have found out about what went on there, can you say that in retrospect there were some things that you could have done, perhaps, or should have done in terms of greater oversight, vigilance, hiring more auditors, that, based on your response, might have prevented some of what went on. Were there mistakes that you can own up to now, specifically?

The Secretary-General: First of all, I do not want to get into too many details on an issue that is under investigation. But when you run this sort of operation, it is inevitable that there may be some mistakes and things that could have been done better. But we will all get back to that once we have the report.

Question: On the issue of the Middle East, you have indicated that the United Nations intends to play a bigger role in the Middle East in supporting the Palestinian elections. How personally involved will you be in this process? And do you think there is any indication that the United Nations will be allowed to play a bigger role within the Quartet? Also, do you intend to visit the region? And what are the prospects for peace in the wake of the Palestinian President's death?

The Secretary-General: I think the United Nations has been very active with the elections. In an interesting sort of way, perhaps it is going to be one of the best-prepared elections because we have been working with them and on it for about a year. The Israeli authorities have indicated that they will cooperate and remove some of the barriers or roadblocks to facilitate the movement of people during that period. So, I am hopeful that they will have very successful elections and that they will cap the very smooth transition arrangements which the Palestinians have embarked on since the death of President Arafat.

On the question of the Quartet, obviously the United Nations, as a member of the Quartet, will play its role along with other members of the Quartet. Indications are that all the members of the Quartet are going to be very active as we move into the new year. We see that the dynamics on the ground have changed and there is an opening which, if effectively exploited, can move the process forward. In addition to the Quartet, there are many other countries in Europe and elsewhere who have become very engaged in this process, as well as countries in the region that we hope to work with.

And so I think that the prospects for peace are brighter. It doesn't mean that we don't have difficulties ahead of us, but I think we do have a real chance to make progress.

Question: Two questions, if I could, on the oil-for-food. Do you feel that you bear any responsibility -- personal responsibility -- for what did go wrong in the programme? Also, do you agree with your son's term that the examinations and the allegations are a "witch hunt"?

The Secretary-General: I don't agree with that. And on the second one, I think my answer to an earlier question indeed dealt with that and I think we should wait for the investigations, because I don't think it would be appropriate for me to answer that sort of question when we have investigations going on.

Question: You said before that the Council should take its responsibility on Darfur. In the past, you have intervened or given your position. Do you think, in this case, they should enact some of the targeted sanctions they have threatened, from arms embargo to travel against certain individuals, or do you think the issue should go to the ICC?

The Secretary-General: I think the Council, like all of us, has been following the situation in the Sudan. We have been promised a peace agreement by the end of the year on the North-South, which everyone hopes will help energize other processes within the country. But we are also seeing that the situation on the ground is deteriorating and that the IDPs are having a very difficult time. So, there comes a time when you have to make a reassessment as to whether the approach you have taken is working or not. And if it is not working, what other measures do you take?

The Council itself has talked of sanctions in the past. A majority of the Council members would want the ICC to play a role, but we also know that the US has a problem with any referral to the ICC, and this is an issue the Council will have to find a way around. But I think those who are perpetrating these crimes must not be allowed to get away and impunity must not be allowed to stand.

Question: But there's no other alternative, is there? There's the ICC and there are targeted sanctions. Perhaps you can suggest a third way to combat impunity?

The Secretary-General: No, but I think the proposals on the table should be looked at very seriously by the Council. I think we are at that point now. And the other alternative would be to find a way of really getting as many people on the ground as possible, because everybody agrees that the presence of monitors and police and an international presence often dissuade the attacks.

Question: The security situation in Iraq -- we see the news every day. People are dying in increasing numbers. How can the United Nations ensure transparent, inclusive, fair and -- most important of all -- credible elections in Iraq in January? If the Iraqis voted in small numbers, wouldn't that be worse, since holding the elections will give the perception that there is no credibility to these elections? Do you have an answer as to why the offer to train Iraqi security forces outside Iraq by countries like Germany has not been taken up?

The Secretary-General: I cannot answer your last question; I don't know the intricacies of that. But let me move on to say that, obviously, we are also concerned about the security situation on the ground. We are assisting and advising the Iraqi electoral commission, and I must stress here that they are the ones running the elections. They are responsible for the elections; the United Nations is offering advice and assisting them. We have offered all the technical advice and assistance that we can offer. We have also encouraged them to try and reach out to people outside the process and make the elections as inclusive as possible, because I think that is important, as you imply from your question.

But the Government and electoral commission have decided as of now to go ahead with the elections. All decisions on elections are theirs. We can only advise and assist, and so we need to follow their lead. For the moment, they do need to go ahead. Obviously, the more Iraqis that vote, the better. If we can get people in all regions to vote, it will be better because, once they have all participated and played a role in the elections, the likelihood is that the results will be accepted by all.

Question: Last week at a press conference, lawyers from a US firm that protects whistleblowers said that they had been approached by five or six people in the United Nations with information about the oil-for-food programme and they had advised them against talking to the Volcker inquiry because they did not believe that their jobs could be protected. This whole issue of protection of jobs, whistleblowers and confidence of the staff in senior management has also been one of the serious issues this year, and I wondered whether you could comment on the bigger issue, and also this particular charge.

The Secretary-General: I think, on the issue of accountability and the role of senior management, this is something that I take very seriously and we have discussed it, in fact, amongst ourselves. We are setting up an accountability task force, which we hope to announce very shortly. We are also taking measures to strengthen the protection of whistleblowers. In fact, OIOS has been working on guidelines for some time that we need to put out.

And I am also surprised that anyone would advise United Nations staff not to go to the independent committee headed by Mr. Volcker with any information they have. I can assure you that, from what I know, staff

are cooperating with the commission. They are given as much information as they want, and I don't think anyone has been victimized for cooperating with the commission. In fact, they are under instructions to cooperate and provide any information to the Volcker committee. That is why I am surprised that some groups outside the United Nations would advise the United Nations staff not to offer that information. And, as I said, if they do, they are not going to be victimized.

Question: As a follow-up to Edie's question, first of all, there were two investigations recently that the staff themselves say they were intimidated about testifying in front of -- that's the Nair and the Lubbers investigations. Secondly, the flipside of that is: Will there be any names that will be protected in the oil-for-food public part of the Volcker report, and who makes that decision? You or Volcker?

The Secretary-General: Let me say that I am surprised that you said the staff felt they were intimidated to give evidence in any of these two cases -- because the investigations that were done by OIOS, they did talk to lots of staff, and I did not get the impression that the staff were intimidated to give evidence.

On the question of the Volcker report, I think Mr. Volcker has indicated that there may be moments or situations where for the, not only the protection of individuals but future prosecution or of other things, names may have to be protected. But that will be his decision, not mine.

Question: At this stage, do you believe that the elections in Iraq perhaps should be postponed beyond 30 January? Also, could we just get a sense of your own interpretation of the level of violence in Iraq? There was a terrible attack today in Mosul. Do you have a sense that this is directed primarily against the Iraqi leadership, that it is a grass-roots group or outsiders? And is there anything you think you can do as leader of this international institution to speak out against this violence?

The Secretary-General: Let me say, first of all -- I do not know if you saw the statement that we issued against the attacks on the mosques, the two holy cities, yesterday, condemning those acts. As to what is happening in Iraq, I am not sure I can give you any better information that you have. Obviously, you have various groups at work. I am sure that you have the jihadists and the extremists, you have Iraqis who are resisting occupation, and you have a combination of groups. But you also have, I think, people in Iraq who may not necessarily be violent, who may have other views. And those are the ones that we felt one should try to pull into the process to make it as inclusive as possible. But the violence, if it continues, will have an impact on the elections. Elections do not take place in a vacuum. The political and security context is important, and I think we are all monitoring it very carefully. But the decision whether to go ahead or not is the Iraqis' decision, not ours.

Question: Do you think that there is anything more, perhaps, that the Security Council can do, that individual nations can do, that you can do, to sort of really bear down on the insurgencies and the violence?

The Secretary-General: Recently, as you know, there was a meeting in Sharm al-Sheikh, which brought the neighbours of Iraq and major international players together, and the intention was also to discuss how one can help the situation in Iraq, assist -- support -- the Government, and give them greater confidence and ensure that the transition process will move ahead very smoothly. And they also discussed what one should do to bring into the fold those who are currently outside the process. There were discussions about having meetings with the Iraqi opposition -- either within or outside the country. And, of course, subsequently, there was also a meeting in Tehran which brought together all the ministers of the interior of Iraq's neighbours and Iraq to discuss what they can do to help the situation. So there are some initiatives which are being taken. Whether they have been that effective or not is something else. But people are concerned.

Question: For quite some time, there have been talks going on under the auspices of the United Nations on the recognition of the name of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Now, once the United States has recognized that country under its constitutional name, do you think that the process could speed up -- accelerate?

The Secretary-General: Since that happened, the parties have met and we are trying to encourage them to move the process forward. How long it is going to take and how fast it will move is difficult to say. But I think that

when the United States made the announcement, it did get attention. We have brought the parties together to continue the discussions, and it may help or it may not -- I do not know. But I think, at least, as you said, one major country has come out and recognized the name. But we need to work with the parties to come to an understanding. They are also neighbours and they have to live with each other. So, it is important that we come up with a mutually acceptable solution. And this is what we are trying to find out.

Question: Back on Iraq, given the security and political situation in the country, and with all the elements at your disposal, if you were the one calling the election, would you go ahead and have the elections by the end of January?

The Secretary-General: Fortunately, I am not the one calling the shots. I mean, I am not the one calling the shots, and as I said, the responsibility lies elsewhere. We are advising and assisting, and I do not want to create any problems for anybody.

Question: Next Sunday, the people of Ukraine will go to the polls again. It looks as if the whole world is watching and sending its observers there. What about the United Nations? Are you going to have any United Nations presence at the Ukraine election? What are your expectations with regard to its results and possible implications? And what would be your Christmas and New Year wishes for the Ukrainian people?

The Secretary-General: The United Nations agencies on the ground are and have been very active in helping and supporting the electoral process. I would hope that the next round of elections would be fair and open and all Iraqis -- all Ukrainians -- will exercise their right to vote and that the will of the people will be respected. As to the New Year message, I wish the people of Ukraine a peaceful, democratic and happy new year.

Question: 2004 was a year of greater cooperation between the African Union and the United Nations. Specifically, where have you seen the African Union succeed in 2004, and what does it need to do more of specifically in the coming years? Also, could you repeat your answer that you gave to RFI about the sexual allegations in English, please?

The Secretary-General: I think I will leave him to interpret it to you.

Let me say that the African Union has been very active for a relatively young union. It is beginning to set up its own institutions and has been active in the Sudan. It has also been active in some other crises in Africa. They have been active in Burundi; they have been active with us in Côte d'Ivoire. And we must not forget that when it comes to the Sudan, they are the ones with troops on the ground. As difficult and Herculean as the task is, they did not shy away from it. But they do need help from the international community to make it happen. They are also the ones leading the peace process -- the peace discussions -- between the Darfur rebels and the Government in Abuja. And pressing ahead is the special representative, who is in the lead. We are assisting them. And I think for a relatively young organization they are reaching out and are doing as much as they can.

Question: If you could have one very personal wish granted for the next year, what would it be? What is very dear to you?

The Secretary-General: I would want to see a situation where we see less killing, particularly of the innocent, the displaced. I would want to see the conflicts on my own continent brought to an end. I would want to see an improvement in the situation in Iraq and the Sudan, in particular. There are too many people who are dying. There are too many helpless people who are squeezed in between. And if we can see at least an improvement in some of these areas, it would make my nights and days better.

Question: Sir, I'd like to bring you back to the Volcker investigation, if I might. Are you hoping that by releasing the OIOS internal audits you would be blunting criticism of the Secretariat's role in the oil-for-food scandal? Secondly, how much time have you personally spent with Volcker panel investigators?

The Secretary-General: Let me say that, in our discussions with Congress -- in our exchange of letters; let me put it this way. In our discussions with Mr. Volcker, he has indicated, and we have agreed, that the documents will be released, but in an orderly fashion. One of the first reports to come out will be in January, and some documents will be released. That is not intended necessarily to blunt accusations against the Secretariat, but basically is part of a process. At logical stages these reports will be released.

On your second question, I see no -- in setting up the panel I had lots of discussions with Mr. Volcker, Piet and Judge Goldstone. We have discussed on many occasions the setting up of the commission. I have spoken to them since they started their work.

Thank you very much.

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