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“MIDDLE EAST ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT”

Can social and economic development occur at a time of conflict? Or does peace need to be established before people can begin to improve their lives? The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, or ESCWA, is the UN's development arm in the Middle East region.

ESCWA's 13 members include Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Syrian Arab Republic, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

“We cannot wait for peace”, says ESCWA's Executive Secretary, Ms. Mervat Tallawy in this edition of World Chronicle. Today's show touches upon issues of critical importance to the region such as the role of women in development, good governance and regional cooperation and integration.

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or ESCWA, serves as the main general development forum within the United Nations for the region covering the Middle East, including both Palestine and Iraq. Its goal – to promote economic and social development through regional cooperation and integration.

But how can development take place in countries rife with conflict? And what role specifically can women play to foster socio-economic development during such conflict?

These are some of the questions that will be addressed by our guest today, Ms. Mervat Tallawy, *ESCWA's Executive Secretary*. Mervat Tallawy... welcome. I want to ask the first obvious question, which is, how can you talk about economic development and integration in a region where so many countries are plagued by such problems? The two most obvious ones that spring to mind are the situation in Iraq and the situation in Palestine. Does it make sense to be trying to invest resources in economic development when they are at war?

TALLAWY: As you know some of these problems like the Palestinian, have been with us since half a century. If we continue without any investment in development, I think things will change to the worse. That compels us.. while there is war we should not stay idle from development.

JENKINS: You can't wait for peace.

TALLAWY: No, I cannot and at the same time I would like that the world also understands that if we have a UN objective and UN Millennium Goals to attain and therefore they have to take into consideration that the peaceful resolution of these problems is the only way to let economic and social development take its course.

JENKINS: Right, you are not going to wait for peace. There are a lot of issues that we've got to talk about. Joining us in the studio today, we have Louis Hamann of the *Canadian Broadcasting Corp./CBC*, and, Salah Awad of *Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper* based in London. Salah, why don't you jump in?

AWAD: Just to follow the same question, I want to ask you - do you have any difficulties or any problems to have an access, especially in the occupied territories, which we know and the occupied territories situation very bad? And because always there is the military operation by the Israeli forces and at the same time also the access in the ground in Iraq and we know also the security of there is really very bad. Can you tell us how you deal with this

problem?

TALLAWY: The situation in occupied territories, of course, it is very difficult. I need not dwell on it because you see it on the TV every day. We have to get permission from the Israeli authority to go into the occupied territory. We get it at the end, sometimes after delay, but my last visit was in January, the situation is... I practiced myself all this barricade and check points and...

JENKINS: You mean you lived through it.

TALLAWY: Yes, I lived through it and as one woman professor in the university, she told me, in order to give a lecture of two hours I have to spend six hours on the road. So this is the kind of difficulty that we have. But the important thing was to put the Palestinian together whether private sector, civil society or the authority, the Palestinian authority together to put the priorities for the reconstruction and rehabilitation. What we should start with if we want to help you? Not only the commission but all the other UN agencies, what are the priorities? Let's have Palestinian priorities so we can work on that basis. So from January till October we have been working with all these partner in development and regardless of the difficulties many Palestinian could not attend the forum but we had the forum held lately in Beirut where the Europeans, the Arabs, the Palestinians got together, whether civil society, banks, private sector, and there we got very good initiatives. Already in the three days we got eight initiatives with more than thirty plus million to help the Gaza...

JENKINS: Thirty million dollars?

TALLAWY: Yes, to help the Gaza people in this extreme difficulty now, to rebuild, to replant one million olive trees instead of those who have been uprooted since the Intifada...

JENKINS: A million trees have been uprooted since the Intifada started?

TALLAWY: Yes. And small loans for the women especially those who lost their husband and families. Just eight initiatives that would help from children, handicapped, medical unit, the sector....the agricultural sector in particular, at least to provide food by themselves to the Palestinians.

HAMANN: Now, Ms. Tallawy, if I can jump in, I mean, this issue of access that Salah has brought up obviously brings up the whole question of the role Israel in all this. As I understand it, Israel is not a member of ESCWA?

Why not? And would it help if they were or if at least you had an interlocutor in Jerusalem to try and make these issues....

TALLAWY: Why not? It is a decision by the ECOSOC and General Assembly. It's a historical situation since they established ESCWA. So it was a voting system in the United Nations. Whether if Israel was a member, would it help or not, it depends. It would help if there is peace between the parties. It would not help if this conflict would remain and the debate would turn into political issues. Now we are talking about road, about water, desertification, all the social range of issues, but if we have this Palestinian issue without any resolution between Israel and Palestine then we will, again, it will become a political forum, the same debate.

HAMANN: Now we've spent a lot of time here just in the opening of the show talking about Palestine, Iraq I'm sure will follow. You've got more than thirty countries in ESCWA. Are Israel and Iraq or rather the occupied territories in Iraq siphoning all your energy? In other words, do you also have time to tend to problems in the thirty-some other countries that you are responsible for?

TALLAWY: You see, of course, you have to understand that this geographical area called the Arab countries or the Middle East, is a small area, in proximity it is small and it affects what is happening in Iraq for instance, affects Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia whether smuggling of arms, whether movement of personnel, whether trade activities. In trade you have the official trade activities and non-official trade.

JENKINS: You mean smuggling?

TALLAWY: Yes, it's happening. It's normal between borders. So it affects the member states. So our energy is affected because the region used to be one area. The people used to move into this area freely without passport, without eh..

JENKINS: We're talking about colonial times? When they were under Ottoman occupation and then later the British and French.

TALLAWY: Even before...

JENKINS: OK. What you say makes a lot of sense. Reintegrate all of these countries, get them to start trading together, get some economic activity going. To do that, as I understand it, what you say your priorities are to

start building the infrastructure, roads and rail links so that these countries can actually start trading again together. But aren't there major structural problems that make that very hard to achieve? I mean, we've already talked a little bit about the situation in Palestine, and in fact we've barely scratched the surface because, I'm astonished that you want to invest resources into Palestine when as I understand it, according to your figures, a billion dollars worth of infrastructure has been destroyed by the Israeli occupation forces in the last.. since 2000. Six hundred and fifty thousand Palestinian men have been detained. More than half of all Palestinian households have lost more than fifty percent of their revenue. Unemployment stands at a range that oscillates between twenty-six and thirty six percent. Two million Palestinians now live on two dollars a day, more or less. I find it extraordinary that you think you could talk about rebuilding infrastructure and integrating Palestine into the region when your looking at those sorts of problems. But even if you were able to get beyond that, you then have other structural problems such as corruption, for example. Isn't that a major problem?

TALLAWY: Corruption is a major problem everywhere, not only Palestine but in most of the developing countries. My problem here is that if you leave a situation like Palestine without any help without any connection with the Arab surrounding and therefore the end result, they will become displaced people given the rate of destruction of homes like what is happening now in Gaza, then you have a bunch of nomadic people that are about to be exiting the territory. The Israeli will say we don't have an interlocutor on the other part. With whom are we going to have peace? Unless these people would stand on their feet and have some help to restore productivity in the agricultural area and the industrial area and the service area, to get connected with other people in the diaspora. You know that during the last ten years the Palestinian in the diaspora, they sent more than fourteen billion dollars to their parents or families in the occupied territories?

JENKINS: So it seems to be... so what you are saying is that you need to create the seeds of hope. You need to get people dreaming and planning for the future so that when it becomes physically more feasible there will be some plans ready to put into action. Is that what you are saying?

TALLAWY: More than that I'm saying. This is what I'm saying,.but in addition it will give the Palestinian hope another way of struggle

other than the militaries. That they have something to develop, that they have something to look at the results, and they would shift their mind from just the military fighting or the suicidal attack into development. Development could be a way of standing up to the Israeli. And I hope too for the future. So we take it as a sign of resistance through development. Not through....

JENKINS: Your making it is sound quite political actually when you say ... talk of it as resistance...Salah..

TALLAWY: To convince them, for the argument, that there are other ways of, of.. asking for your rights, of asking for the international law and all these rights. The rights to development is one of the rights.

AWAD: Can you tell us what kind of difficulties you are facing and country which as Tony said, they have corruption, government corrupted. And at the same time there is a lot of civil society, for example, the roll of the woman is completely limited in some area. So which kind of difficulty? Can you tell us?

TALLAWY: There are a lot of difficulties. From the government point of view they say that as long as there is war, occupation, violence, this disturbance we don't....it's not our priority, for instance, to think of the right of women or equality between groups and so on. At the same time, don't underestimate the role played by the United Nations all through these years, that you are increasing awareness, that you are bringing these items of corruption, of good governance, of human rights into the agenda...the national agenda of so many member states that they never heard. At a given moment to speak about poverty in this country it was a taboo. Now they are having a plan of action to fight poverty by the year 2015. Human rights, women issues, they were also things that you should not touchable. Now some of them they have institutions on human rights, they are proud that they have women ministers and so on and so forth. Still they didn't reach equality as we would wish to see or according to the convention of the United Nations. But there are many steps taken already in this direction. What the United Nations is notshould not be underestimated but these issues by its nature as social policies will take long time. Maybe we outsiders we would wish to see things happening tomorrow, but this by its nature cannot happen that fast.

JENKINS: Louis, I know you want to jump in...let me just say

that this is **World Chronicle** and our guest is Ms. Mervat Tallawy the *Executive Secretary* of the *United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, or ESCWA*. Louis...

HAMANN: I'd like to move the conversation to Iraq, if I may. What is ESCWA doing there right now in Iraq, given the security situation? I mean, everybody seem to be fleeing the country and so given your mandate it must be a little bit difficult. Do you have any staff in Iraq and what are you doing there?

TALLAWY: As you may know, ESCWA was hosted by the Iraqi government for eight years, so we stayed in Iraq for eight years.

JENKINS: When did you pull out?

TALLAWY: In the Iraq/Iran war.

JENKINS: OK, back in the eighties.

TALLAWY: And they moved to Jordan and then from Jordan they moved to Beirut again. I'm saying that what we do in Iraq, we do it from outside Iraq, from Beirut. We concentrate on capacity building whether for the individual or the machinery or the institutions within Iraq. The fact that we have been living in Iraq for eight years, we have now a number of our staff are Iraqis, they have very good connection with Iraq, with number of ministers actually in the government so we have an easy access to the authority there. We can call them by phone, we can ask them what do they need, how can we help and in fact the Minister of Planning, Hafez al-Madhi, came to us and gave us a list of twenty/twenty-two tasks to do for them.

HAMANN: But talking to the authorities, if I may interrupt, talking to the authorities is one thing. I think you are more in the business of also talking to people....

JENKINS: Should we clarify one thing? Presumably the reason you are not on the ground in Iraq is because you're not allowed to be there.

TALLAWY: Yes. After this massacre of the UN staff in Iraq in August 2003, it is not allowed that you go unless you have security clearance.

HAMANN: And here is my question. How difficult does that make your work having to do you work essentially from another location?

TALLAWY: Of course, it is very difficult to work from outside Iraq. If we were inside Iraq things would have moved quicker, larger scale and so on.

But given the circumstances, I have to abide by the regulations, we try to help from outside. So they do come, the Iraqis, women and not necessarily governments only, because now the governments and the NGOs there is not sensitivity there to send their NGOs. So we had a number of women, forty women who came and we trained them for the coming elections. We had professors of the university, women and men to upgrade their laboratory and so on through putting them with other universities in Beirut and in Emirates, students to have training courses, summer training courses in Abu Dhabi.

JENKINS: Is that your primary function in Iraq, to give people skills, technical skills so that they can run the government basically?

TALLAWY: This is what we can best do now since we are not on the ground there. If we were on the ground we could help in water, in electricity, in all of these other areas..

JENKINS: In a supervisory capacity?

AWAD: But one thing, Tony, if I may ask, who decided to not allow you to be on the ground in Iraq?

TALLAWY: Under the obligation of the Secretary-General, we cannot go there without his permission, because he is the main [person] responsible for the staff and their security. So if he will allow ESCWA to go he has to allow UNDP and the other. But he is now assigning a number of international staff, thirty-five, to deal with the political issue for the coming election. So this is priority for him. We have to abide by his rules.

JENKINS: And the problem there being of course that the UN has not been able to put together a protection force to take care of the security of UN staff on the ground. I want to come back to this idea of what you are trying to do to foster economic development in the region, which is integration. We've talked about transport, roads and railways and that sort of thing. It's much easier to integrate disparate economies if they agree on the same principles. The world it seems to me has moved in a direction of accepting market forces, transparent economic systems with courts that function, that sort of thing. This part of the world that your dealing with lags behind many other parts of the world in terms of its acceptance of those sorts of norms. Has that been a problem? I mean, we've heard of some growing openness. I believe, Egypt started a process about fifteen years ago, Syria more recently. Have they gone far enough? Is there

more to be done? Where are your major problems in that sort of area?

TALLAWY: The problem is two-fold. First of all, there is lack of information about what is happening in these countries. The old idea that they are the most underdeveloped in this region in the world as a region - it's not correct. Many of them have – more than even some of the developed countries – look at Dubai and Emirate. The Emirates, they have e-governments, e-commerce, e-business, they even .. your passport is not stamped by the police. It is very advanced. Some others are not as advanced.

JENKINS: But openness to technology is one thing. Openness to creating a legal system where a company, a foreign company that comes in invest in your country has a problem, they can trust the judiciary to give a fair determination to their case. Problems of having to pay money under the table to people who have their hands out, those are different sorts of problems..

TALLAWY: This is the second point I'm saying. The second point is the mentality. And this is a difficult thing, although if you look at many regulations and legislations and investment law in many of these countries, they are very advanced and they allow for the private sector and many of their companies are privatized and so on and so forth. The latest of them may be Syria because it came late in opening its market for the private sector. But many others are as you said, Egypt from more than fifteen years, Saudi Arabia from before that and so on. The problem remains the mentality, the mentality of the technocrat who is in charge of implementing these rules and regulations. Some of their mentality is obstructing or deviating or interpreting the laws in a way that would hinder the capacity of foreign investors to do that...

AWAD: You're talking about... your covering basically some of the Gulf countries and I guess one of the problems, I think, to promote the social economic development is the lack also of human resources. How do you deal with this problem?

TALLAWY: Human resources for ... where's the unemployment you mean?

AWAD: I mean even the promoting of your agenda in terms of development social economic...

JENKINS: You mean that there aren't enough capitalists out there, is that what you are saying?

AWAD: No not enough capital. Human resources, the cadre, the people...

TALLAWY: I think the major problem that is still remaining in these countries is some of the tradition that affect the upbringing of the young people. Some of them are very bright but they are ashamed by this ... some of the traditions that sometimes are not positive ones. I don't mind to keep the good traditions but some of the negative ones should be really worked out and changed.

HAMANN: And how do you do that? How do you change traditions? Because that is, I think, a key...

TALLAWY: Yes, it is very difficult but I believe with the new technology and the electronic media and all of this, we are not using our media enough whether in the soap opera whether in the film or our writing, we should address all these negative issues maybe more than the education because education you can review the programme and the syllabus and change as you like but it is the media, the environment reach out to the very remote area where you have to change the tribal system and the mentality under these negative things. We did not give enough attention yet to this particular thing and we did not use our media enough for changing positively this

HAMANN: Speaking of change, if I may, one of the arguments that we hear a lot, notably out of Washington since the conflict in Iraq, is that a democratic Iraq, a stable Iraq can have an incredible force in terms of being able to change the region. It can be a catalyst if you will, whether we are talking about human rights, gender equality, technological advances, whatever. Do you believe in that sort of, in that line of thinking that if we can get Iraq right and back on its feet it can have an enormous impact for change in the region? Or are we overestimating the impact that that could have?

TALLAWY: Look, to be more practical, one country cannot change everything. I mean it's overly optimistic to say that if Egypt has a democratic system it will affect the other ... of course, affect, yes, to a certain extent. But I don't think so that one country would change everything. The change should be in every country.

JENKINS: All right. Well there's another issue to do with mentality that in other parts of the world where perhaps all else has failed, one

thing that has always worked has been to give micro loans especially to women so that they can start their own little businesses and enterprises. Is that something you're pursuing? And how does that work with what are still very patriarchal societies in that region?

TALLAWY: As far as business is concerned women in those patriarchal societies has always been working in businesses. Its ...

JENKINS: It's nothing new for them.

TALLAWY: Nothing new. But this to provide more financing more small credit and so on and this is to facilitate their task. But they have been always working, whether they are nomad or in rural area or whatever, they have been working all through the history but there is no recognition for this and no payment for what the...

JENKINS: And you are investing resources in women now?

TALLAWY: Yes, definitely and we are encouraging more of this kind of small loans for women and we are doing it in South Lebanon after the Israel left these territories in order to keep the people in the mountain not to come to Beirut.

JENKINS: That sounds like a hopeful note to end on. We're out of time...Mervat Tallawy, thank you very much. Our guest has been Ms. Mervat Tallawy the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, or ESCWA. She was interviewed by Louis Hamann of *Canadian Broadcasting Corp./CBC*, and Salah Awad of the *Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper*.

I'm Tony Jenkins. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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