



World Chronicle

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The UN and Iraq

For over a decade, the United Nations has been active in Iraq – from weapons inspections to humanitarian relief operations, from the Oil-for-Food programme to the forthcoming elections. The United Nations efforts to support the Iraqi population however, have often been forgotten – and at times even disparaged.

In this edition of **World Chronicle**, Edward Mortimer, the United Nations' Director of Communications at the Office of the Secretary General, looks back at the organization's actions in Iraq and looks to the future to see what can be achieved.

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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**.

JENKINS: Hello, I'm Tony Jenkins.

It's hard to believe that the issue of Iraq, now perhaps the most divisive issue on the international agenda, once galvanized the global community and re-energized the United Nations Security Council. In 1990, the Security Council was united as never before in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The first President Bush called this the UN's "finest moment".

But more than a decade later, a divided Security Council did not authorize a second Gulf War. The UN, as an institution, was widely criticized by detractors. First and foremost was the US, with George W. Bush questioning whether the UN would serve the purpose of its founding or become irrelevant? In the midst of all this political wrangling, the UN's Iraq efforts in various fields have either been forgotten or, worse, disparaged.

Today we'll be looking back at the UN's role and actions in Iraq and forward to what might be possible in the future.

Our guest today is **Edward Mortimer**, the United Nation's Director of Communications in the Office of the Secretary-General. Also, joining us are Colum Lynch of the *Washington Post*, and Louis Hamann of the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/CBC*.

Mr. Mortimer, thanks for being with us on **World Chronicle**.

We're taping this in the immediate aftermath of the results of the US election. My first question has to be is this bad news for the UN? After all, the Secretary-General has called the war in Iraq an illegal war on several occasions and won no friends in the White House as a result of that. The Bush administration has been critical of a number of UN staff, or how few UN staff are currently in Iraq. The feeling amongst many people is there is no love lost between this administration in Washington and this administration here at the United Nations. Are they wrong?

MORTIMER: I don't want to generalize. I think there's certainly been some differences between the Secretary-General and the President or one or other member of his administration but there has been a correct, polite and constructive working relationship on many issues. And on the whole I would include Iraq in that, particularly in the last few months where, of course, we would like to have more staff deployed in Iraq. But I think the administration fully understands the security problems. It's trying to help us overcome those and it appreciates what we are doing, particularly to help with the electoral process.

JENKINS: All right, before I throw it open to – I'll go Louis in a moment – but before doing that let's set this in some historical context. As I was saying in my introduction things were very different with the first Gulf war and that was seen as a tremendous success. Has this second phase, if you like, of the UN's involvement in Iraq been much worse? Has it been a disaster

MORTIMER: I think undoubtedly there was a period in the early 90s when – it was just after the Cold War – Saddam Hussein almost did the UN a favour you could say by attacking a sovereign state. It was a very, very clear text book case of aggression and for once the international community came together and dealt with it more or less as the UN Charter proposes that such a thing should be dealt with. By the middle or late 1990s you had a very different atmosphere when key members of the Security Council were no longer convinced that sanctions was the right way to deal with Iraq and at the same time they couldn't lift them because you needed to get past the veto of at least two permanent members in order to do that. So the Secretary-General and the Secretariat were put in a very difficult position of having to try and spin a coherent policy out of strongly opposed views within the Security Council. I think, considering that, we didn't do a bad job. I mean the sanctions remained in place. We know that Saddam had in fact got rid of his weapons of mass destruction. We know from Duelfer's report that he hadn't even begun to try and reassemble them by the time of the war last year and whatever you can say about the Oil-for-Food Programme the fact is it did alleviate the pain for a very considerable number of Iraqis and thereby it also made it easier for those who wanted to keep the sanctions on to do so because I think that was a big problem in the mid-nineties that it was conceived to be untenable.

JENKINS: Edward, I'm going to stop you right there because you've covered a vast amount of territory and I think we're going to want to go into several of those things in detail. I'm going to throw it over to Louis first.

HAMMAN: Edward, with the American elections at least out of the way for now, isn't it maybe time for the UN to square with the Iraqi people and say it that it might not be possible to hold these elections in Iraq by the end of January?

MORTIMER: I don't think it's for us to say that. These elections are being run by an independent electoral commission which the UN helped to set up back in May – remember when Carina Perelli was in Iraq – and they are the people in charge. And the question of whether elections can be held or whether they should be held in particular circumstances I really think is one for that commission to decide and not for the UN.

HAMANN: Yes, but isn't it somewhat easy to sort of throw the ball to the Iraqis? I understand it's the Iraqis' responsibility and they are running the process but, you've said so yourself, the UN is an integral part of having set up that commission and I think the UN has got some kind of a responsibility as well as to maybe, if you will, rectify the position of that. Not rectify the position of the electoral commission but at least maybe counsel it or, you know, suggest that "Hey guys, maybe this won't be possible." And you'd better say it now sooner than later.

JENKINS: Maybe you are already doing that in private?

MORTIMER: No, no because the advice and help we are giving to the commission is of a technical nature. On the political side, of course, important conditions – well there are two conditions basically for the elections to be held successfully. One is that there should be a reasonable level of security in the country so that people can actually go and vote without being mown down by insurgents and the other is that the population as a whole is willing to take part. If you have a whole segment of the population – for example, the Sunni Arabs – who simply don't go to the polls at all that would greatly reduce the value of the process. Now those two issues are clearly connected with each other and I think that what is needed is a political dialogue such that those people who might be tempted to boycott the elections, or indeed to support any kind of violent disruption of them, would feel that, no, that would be wrong because they too have a stake; they have an opportunity to participate

LYNCH: Edward, there a number of officials who privately, in the United Nations say, are very concerned that the elections coming up so soon, that there is not going to really be enough time to sort of strike a deal with the Sunnis you were referring to, Sunni groups, and there's likely to be a boycott and that there is enormous concern that the election process is no longer part of a process that is going to stabilize the country but it's going to do exactly the opposite. You're going to leave the Sunnis out of the political process and you are going to sort of move the country more speedily towards a possible civil war. And is that a view that is shared throughout the United Nations or a concern that's deeply felt? And also is there not a responsibility to sort of step up to the plate and say, "Look here, maybe it's not such a good idea to have elections. Maybe they are going to put us in a darker, worse place down the road than delaying this process?"

MORTIMER: I don't think we are in a position to make that judgement right now and I think that, on the contrary, we would prefer to look at it positively and say, you know, Iraqis desperately want these elections. If you remember, the original purpose of Mr. Brahimi going there in February was to certify whether they couldn't be held in June. That is what

Ayatollah Sistani wanted and a lot of people, particularly in the Shia community wanted that. And he basically came to the conclusion, “No, you can’t do it in June because you simply will not be ready, technically. It will take eight months. We can help you with that.” And so that was why it was decided to have the interim government and to put them off until January. I think it will be deeply frustrating for many, many people in Iraq if they have to be postponed beyond January and I think it would feed the suspicions that many people have that it wasn’t really a serious plan, or what was purported to be an interim government intends to stay there. So our advice to Mr. Allawi, and indeed to the Coalition, would be go all out for dialogue. Look for a peaceful way to resolve the differences in places like Faluja. If you bomb Faluja, kill a lot of civilians and then the insurgents pop up in Mosul or somewhere else you won’t actually be nearer to holding successful and peaceful elections. So that is why the Secretary-General has a special representative, Mr. Ashraf Qazi, on the spot. He is available to try and help bring about that dialogue. It may not work and one might get to a point where you’d have to make the judgement that you just implied, but it would not be helpful for the UN to come out prematurely with any judgement like that. I think nobody should see the UN as a body that wants to postpone these elections. On the contrary. The UN is doing everything it can to try and help Iraqis to hold those elections on time.

HAMANN: But back on the technical side, because obviously the UN is involved on the technical side, you’ve got thirty-some people on the ground right now. Clearly more will be needed?

MORTIMER: I think one shouldn’t get hung up too much on the question of the number of people in Iraq. I mean, we’ve been doing an enormous amount, most of it outside Iraq. We trained the members of the electoral commission itself. We trained several hundred other people to oversee this process. They then went back to Iraq and they have been training thousands of others with the registration and polling offices. We compiled, outside Iraq, the electoral lists which were put, essentially, by merging the databases of the food distribution system. These lists are now being, I think, posted in food distribution centres throughout Iraq so that Iraqis can go and check whether their names are on the lists. It doesn’t require UN people inside the country to do that. It would be good if we can get a few more into the country within the next few weeks. We hope that security arrangements will make that possible. But frankly it’s not the presence – the fact that there are 10 rather than 20 UN electoral experts in the country – that is going to make the difference between these elections going ahead or going ahead successfully or not.

JENKINS: I want to move on a little bit from the elections specifically but I think the issue is interesting because I actually think what it does is it reflects, if you like, a suspicion of the United Nations; a suspicion among certain people in Washington that the UN is not really wholeheartedly committed to Iraq. And this of course grows out from some of the things you touched on earlier, some of the other issues or problems that have arisen between the United Nations and Iraq. One of the principal ones that I think all of us hear about all of the time is the Oil-for-Food Programme. Every time I park my car in the garage this guy who parks my car who knows very little about foreign affairs keeps saying, "What about Oil-for-Food then? The UN pocketed ten billion dollars." It's been an enormous black eye for the United Nations, is it justified?

MORTIMER: It is absolutely not justified. I mean whatever billions of dollars were acquired by Saddam, and some of that may indeed have been illicit, it was not pocketed by the UN. At worst, the UN might be held responsible for allowing some of those ten billion to get into his pocket when perhaps we could have stopped it. I'm not sure if this is the case but even then it would only be about 1.7 out of the ten or eleven billion to which Mr. Duelfer refers in his report.

JENKINS: That's the latest American figure is 1.74 billion dollars – billion dollars I should say.

MORTIMER: That is directly related to the Oil-for-Food Programme, according to Mr. Duelfer, mainly in the form of kickbacks paid by companies that got humanitarian contracts and a smaller amount in the form of surcharges paid by companies that purchased Iraqi oil. But that the Security Council does seem to have put a stop to in 2002 partly because the oil overseers, the UN overseers and the Secretary-General, drew their attention to the pricing anomaly and they moved to fixing the price at the end of the month rather than the beginning, which of course made it much more difficult. I think on the imports side it's more complicated because you had such a wide range of goods that were going in, it was hard for the UN to know exactly in each case whether the price was right. Nonetheless, my colleagues working for the programme did in many cases draw the attention of the Security Council to the fact that the price looked to them a bit high for the goods in question. Any member of the Council could put contracts on hold. As I'm sure you know, Britain and the United States put many contracts on hold because they were worried that these might be dual-capable goods; ones that would have military applications. In not a single case that we've been able to find did they put a contract on hold because they thought the price was wrong or because they were worried about the quality of the goods.

LYNCH: What can you say about the whole issue of conflict of interest in the programme? I know there's been a lot of investigations, sort of reporting in the press about the role of Kofi Annan's son, or not the role, but the fact that Kofi Annan's son, Kojo Annan, was working for a company that was hired to conduct some of the monitoring of the programme, PROTECNA. The UN said that he was not working, he was not under contract at the time, that the contract was given to this company and that it turned out that the *Wall Street Journal's* reported that in fact that he stayed on with the company on contract for some time afterwards.

JENKINS: Edward, before you answer that let me take a quick break to say this is **World Chronicle** and our guest is the UN's Director of Communications in the Office of the Secretary-General, Edward Mortimer.

MORTIMER: Well, two things on that. First, all those issues are being investigated by Paul Volcker and his inquiry so if any corruption, any conflict of interest that occurred I'm sure that he will report on that and appropriate action will be taken. But, secondly, I really think the issue of Kojo Annan is a red herring. As you said, he worked in a very junior capacity in a completely different part of the world for a company that was subsequently awarded a contract to do inspections in Iraq. He left that company more or less at the time when the contract was awarded. It turns out that apparently under a normal arrangement in Switzerland, and I think also in other countries, part of the terms of his severance allowed him to continue to be paid a non-compete fee. In other words, when you've got somebody who knows all about your client list and your services and they leave you, you don't want them to immediately set up a business that competes with you so you say we'll continue to pay you so much a month for a year. And that, I think, is the nature of the arrangement. But, I repeat, anything like that that isn't proper Paul Volcker, I'm sure, will get to the bottom of it.

HAMANN: Now, you say that you're sure that Paul Volcker is going to get to the bottom of this but it's not going to be up to Mr. Volcker to actually take action on whatever he reports. Now, a lot of people know that around here oftentimes reports suggests that things should happen to certain officials and they don't because the Secretary-General decides or judges that, you know, no such action is warranted.

MORTIMER: I don't think it's often. I think you have a particular case in mind which was in the news this week or last week.

HAMANN: Fair enough. But can we expect though this investigation to really get to the bottom of things and that action will actually be taken and people will be held accountable?

MORTIMER: I'm sure that people will be held accountable. The Secretary-General has given very clear assurances to that effect. We need to know what they are being held accountable for. I think there's been a great tendency in all this affair to assume guilt on the basis of circumstantial evidence rather than waiting to see what actually happens. If you read Mr. Duelfer's report – you know it lists all these people who apparently received vouchers for lifting Iraqi oil, but he is careful to say that that is not proof that they benefited financially from it. If you are thinking of the particular case of Mr. Sevan, the report actually says that the vouchers were collected by somebody else, an Egyptian national now living in Switzerland. Now, whether this person has any connection with Mr. Sevan or not or how Mr. Sevan's name came to be on that list and why oil was being allocated to him in the first place, I don't know. But that's precisely the sort of thing that has to be investigated and I really don't think we should assume that he is guilty until the facts are fully established.

HAMANN: Do you think Mr. Volcker's investigation could be more effective if he actually had subpoena powers for example?

MORTIMER: I don't think you can have subpoena powers and I don't, as a matter of fact, think the United States would like an inquiry appointed by the UN to have subpoena powers. It's courts that have subpoena powers and what he has got is the support of the Security Council promising him full cooperation and insisting that all member states give him full cooperation, and the order of the Secretary-General that all UN staff, on pain of dismissal, will give him full cooperation. Now, if he finds that people have broken the law they, of course, can be pursued in the courts and I'm sure that would happen. And the Secretary-General there is on record as saying in such a case he would waive the immunity of the person concerned. And indeed he normally does that because that immunity is not there to obstruct the course of justice, or to enable people to get away with private crimes. There've been many cases, where UN officials have been found to have committed crimes, their immunity has been waived, they've been prosecuted, convicted and punished. That immunity is there to protect them in the exercise of their functions as UN officials.

JENKINS: There's another side to the Oil-for-Food Programme, of course, which is the actual humanitarian assistance part of it which itself is also being criticized. As you mentioned before part of the disunity that started to emerge in the 1990s in the Security Council was because of the conviction amongst a number of member states that in fact these measures were still permitting a situation to persist in Iraq in which hundreds of thousands of children were dying of disease and malnutrition. How effective on the humanitarian front was the Oil-for-Food Programme?

MORTIMER: I think it's clear that they – I mean the very same sources for which those statistics came about child mortality found a sharp drop in it during the six years that the programme was functioning.

JENKINS: So you say it worked?

MORTIMER: It worked. I mean people's nutrition, caloric intake went up. A number of diseases were greatly reduced. Polio was actually eradicated in Iraq during this period. I mean I'm not saying that it was fun to be an Iraqi living under Saddam Hussein and under sanctions in 2003 but at least the effects were mitigated by this programme and that was it's objective.

LYNCH: If I can take you back to the question of accountability that you guys sort of skated around, Ruud Lubbers, the former Dutch Prime Minister, was accused last year of sexual harassment by a UN employee. A UN internal investigation supported those allegations and the Secretary-General decided that the allegations were unjustified, unsubstantiated and he essentially cleared or gave him a clean bill of health. Why was that?

MORTIMER: I don't think a clean bill of health might be overstating it. He, after reading....

LYNCH: You mean it wasn't a clean bill of health? That he may actually believe that he was responsible?

MORTIMER: Well, I mean, remember that you are innocent unless proved guilty and that is actually specified in the regulations that cover OIOS, the Office of Internal Oversight Services. The Secretary-General felt after reading their report very carefully and after getting legal advice that the evidence was not such as to substantiate or sustain the accusations. In other words, that he would not be justified in equity, or probably in law, in taking disciplinary action against Mr Lubbers.

LYNCH: So the investigators were incompetent? They did a lousy job? Is that what happened?

MORTIMER: Well, I really don't want to comment on that but that you might have noticed that in transmitting the annual report of the office to the General Assembly last week, the Secretary-General said that they have done an evaluation exercise of themselves but they have never been independently evaluated and they've now been in existence for 10 years. I think it would be a good idea if the Assembly ordered a comprehensive independent review of OIOS to see if it's doing it's job, if it's properly structured so that it can do it's job and I would be happy, if asked, to appoint suitable people to carry out such an investigation. So I think that that is a space to be watched. You know this is an experiment. We've had this office for 10

years. It has done some very good work. It may not be perfectly thought out or perfectly constituted to do all the work that it has to do and I would think that member states would probably support the Secretary-General in saying, "Let's have a good look at it now and see how it can be improved".

HAMANN: On the question of sexual harassment, Edward, should they be held to a legal standard as the threshold, you know, given the fact that we know that these cases are so difficult to prove even in the best of circumstances?

MORTIMER: They are extremely difficult to prove. I mean this was an odd case in which it happens that at the time of the alleged incident there were other people present so that it shouldn't have been that difficult to prove because you would think that they would have seen it and would have corroborated it. But in any case the fact is you can't convict somebody unless there is satisfactory proof or evidence against him. I mean that is the sort of basic principle of

JENKINS: I'm going to bring the conversation back to Iraq again, if I can.

MORTIMER: Thank you.

JENKINS: Weapons of mass destruction is of course another – perhaps the other huge element of the UN's role in Iraq. The alleged existence of these weapons was the reason that the Bush administration went to war in Iraq. It now appears that the inspectors, to some extent, at least were vindicated. That they had done their job pretty well. What went wrong? If they were doing their job, if they had managed to more or less dismantle Saddam's weapons programme, how come the message didn't get out?

MORTIMER: The one person who should be asked that is Saddam because I think everybody was assuming that Saddam was being evasive because he had some weapons somewhere that he was concealing. Now, it looks as though actually what he was doing was wanting people – remember that, you know, he – and in fact Duelfer says this. I mean, he was very concerned about the possibility of Iran resuming hostilities against him. He basically had defeated Iran by using chemical weapons in 1988. Let's not forget that. And although he had found it prudent because of the inspections and because of the sanctions to destroy the weapons he had, seems like he didn't want everybody to know that. And so of course in the end that didn't do him any good because it fed suspicions which turn out to have been unjustified. But I think as far as what the Duelfer report shows is indeed that the inspections and the sanctions were effective.

JENKINS: If they were, Hans Blix, the head of the inspectors in Iraq, was essentially reporting progress that things were moving forward, where he was uncovering

problems such as with missiles that were exceeding the distance, that Iraq was starting to dismantle them and he was asking for more time to continue this process. What went wrong as far as you are concerned?

MORTIMER: Well, it seems that a majority of members of the Security Council agreed with him about that and perhaps it would – of course it may be an easy judgement to make with hindsight but quite a lot of people even at the time said, “Let’s give this more time. Are we really so sure?” I’m not sure whether looking at the situation in Iraq now one can be confident that the right decision was taken. Let’s admit that these decisions are difficult.

JENKINS: Are there any lessons that the UN draws from this.? Were you strong enough in support of Hans Blix?

MORTIMER: I don’t know who you mean by “we”. I think that certainly Hans Blix had the full confidence and support of the Secretary-General throughout his mission.

HAMANN: Since we are back on Iraq I’d like to get back to this issue of staff in Iraq. I don’t want a debate whether 35 is enough or not but there are some people and many experts who have actually criticized the UN ever since the bombing on August 19th of last year, that they UN has sort of gone way beyond the pale now in terms of it’s prudence. I’m not trying to suggest that having security measures in place isn’t important and protecting the staff isn’t important but isn’t if the UN’s job to be in dangerous places after all?

MORTIMER: The UN is in many dangerous places. And I might remind you that just this week, and as we sit here, three of my colleagues in Afghanistan have been taken hostage and are threatened with death because they were in a dangerous place helping with the elections in Afghanistan. And we are in Liberia, we’re in Sudan, we’re in many very dangerous places. Of course, risk comes with the job. At the same time after what’s happened in Baghdad and when you are quite clearly targeted you can’t be foolhardy. Ask the Staff Union what they think about it? Actually, the Secretary-General has gone beyond what the Staff Union consider prudent but essentially what we have to do is not avoid risk but manage it better, minimize it by having better security arrangements. We are trying to do that in Iraq, in discussions with the multinational force – basically the Coalition – about having specific troops to protect our people in Iraq. But we are also trying to do it generally by asking the General Assembly for more money so that we can improve our security around the world. And I very much hope that governments will support that because if they want the UN to be in their countries doing good work for humanitarian work, for development work and all the things the UN does they have to be prepared to give a reasonable degree of security to the people who are doing that.

JENKINS: Edward, that's a perfect note to end on because we're fresh out of time. Thank you for being with us.

MORTIMER: I very much enjoyed it. Thank you.

JENKINS: Our guest has been **Edward Mortimer**, the UN's Director of Communications in the Office of the Secretary-General.

He was interviewed by Colum Lynch of the *Washington Post* and Louis Hamann, of the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*.

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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