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World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

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GUEST: Michael Douglas
UN Messenger of Peace

MODERATOR: Shashi Tharoor

“A Conversation with Michael Douglas: UN Messenger of Peace”

As a UN Messenger of Peace, actor and producer Michael Douglas has provided his time and talent to help get the UN message on disarmament across to the millions of people around the world that recognize and admire him.

In this special edition of World Chronicle, hosted by Shashi Tharoor, Michael Douglas talks about his commitment to the UN, his thoughts on multilateralism, his activism on disarmament issues, the movies, and his personal experiences witnessing the rehabilitation of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone. He also does a creditable imitation of a cat...

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Director: Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistant: Lebe Besa

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**.

THAROOR: Hello, and welcome to **World Chronicle**. I'm Shashi Tharoor.

We're privileged to have in our studio today one of the brightest stars of the Hollywood firmament and a great supporter of the United Nations. Please join me for a conversation with Academy Award winning actor and producer, Michael Douglas, a United Nation's Messenger of Peace. Michael, thank you for being with us.

DOUGLAS: My pleasure, Shashi. Nice to be here.

THAROOR: Well, as a messenger of peace for the UN, Michael, you are part of a proud tradition of artists and celebrities who have worked with the UN for years now. How do you interpret this role? You've been doing it since 1998, did you always feel this was something that you would have liked to have done for the world?

DOUGLAS: It's been an evolving process, Shashi. I've always felt strongly for a while about disarmament, both small weapons as well as weapons of mass destruction, and I've learned a lot through different films that I have [done]. And when I was fortunate enough to be appointed by Secretary-General Annan in 1999 I saw this is a wonderful opportunity to sort of spread the UN message on the entertainment page so to speak -- we spoke about this earlier -- and so often you feel like you're preaching to the converted. And I'm at a point where I'm tired of promoting my own movies so to have this honour to be a messenger of peace allows me to talk about issues to people that would not normally be listening to them.

THAROOR: Michael, we know you've gone well beyond the entertainment page. In fact, you spoke quite recently to the US Congress I remember about what you called, "The Limits of Unilateralism". Now that's a question that has been on a lot of people's minds lately. Do you think that most Americans you come across and the ones you addressed out there on Capitol Hill would agree with you that it's best not to go it alone in today's world?

DOUGLAS: Well, I certainly think that there is a majority who feel that way, although under our present administration, in our government they would want you to think otherwise. But seeing the predicaments and issues that we are in that's why I personally support the United Nations so much because of its multilateral position. And as we speak now and with the situation that's evolving in Iraq I think we all would feel much more secure with United Nations' support behind us.

THAROOR: I must thank you for being a very strong advocate over the years of the US meeting its financial obligations to the UN, was there something in particular you were trying to get Congress to do when you went up there and spoke to them?

DOUGLAS: The issue was -- when I spoke in Congress? It was a general thought but it was a committee that was a bipartisan committee and I'm particularly interested wherever possible, particularly in our government, to find bipartisanship -- we seem to polarize ourselves

at every opportunity possible. And this was a hearing that was presented by both Republicans and Democrats and to raise the flag of the United Nations. This present administration has not been supportive in that vein and whatever flaws and faults this organization might have it is by far the best thing going, I believe, and is the best answer for peace on our planet in the future.

THAROOR: I'm glad you mentioned the bipartisan thing because of course, particularly since we're having this conversation in an American election year, I think it's worth stressing that the UN really is above partisan politics. We believe that the US has every interest in supporting the UN, whichever party is in power, whether it's in Congress or in the government, and we therefore really want to work with the US as an institution. And your appeal transcends party identification – and that's so important to us – but at the same time it doesn't transcend issue identification. I'm curious because I remember way back in 1979 when you played that big hit film, "The China Syndrome", you were playing the part of a TV cameraman – and there are one or two in the studio with us as we are talking – who reports on a serious incident in a nuclear facility. And that was also, of course, a film about people being silenced, issues of public interest and security and censorship and all that, but it was also of course about the nuclear threat. And in those days the Cold War was still very much alive. How did working on that film influence your perceptions of the nuclear issue?

DOUGLAS: Well, it was an epiphany for me quite honestly. Knowing that we were dealing with a serious subject matter we brought in several experts and many of those experts were people that used to work in the nuclear industry in quality assurance, Q&A, who had a conversion of faith. And basically they worked out a script scenario for us -- a computer breakdown of this final meltdown accident in the movie. And as the movie was being released, as we made it, we were being charged for irresponsibility in Hollywood and not knowing what we were talking about. And two and a half weeks after the movie came out the Three Mile tragedy happened and one of the most extraordinary things about it, Shashi – a couple of articles were done – is that they compared the computer readout from that event to the sequence of events in our movie, and we're talking about over 150 events, and they were almost identical. So for me that was a strong sense. And learning more about enriched uranium, plutonium, the half-life, just how long this could go on, has made me a real advocate, certainly including nuclear as additional weapons of mass destruction, not just chemical and biological. And so I'm deeply concerned, particularly at this time with our present administration's elimination of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the upcoming Non-proliferation Treaty being reviewed in 2005, to bring as much attention to it as possible because this is a tragedy that we cannot wait to happen. We cannot be reactive as to 9/11. This is something that has to be dealt with before.

THAROOR: But do you think the nuclear threat is as urgent today as it was when you made that movie at the height of the Cold War?

DOUGLAS: I think even more so.

THAROOR: Why?

DOUGLAS: Well, I think after the Cold War – I mean I think the United Nations has a lot to deal with on its plate and a lot of problems and I think there was a passivity that we've sort of felt after the Cold War that it was all over with. But at this point we certainly need to bring Pakistan and India back into the fold, I think Israel has got to once and for all admit it has weapons, Korea has to come back. And under that treaty those members' ultimate philosophy is to eliminate nuclear weapons and we're far from that now. And with the terrorism that exists it is too easy to create a suitcase bomb that would do much, much more damage than anything we can foresee up till now.

THAROOR: In fact, this is part of the problem of course that the original bargain behind the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty was not just that five countries would keep the bomb and nobody else could have it, but that everyone would work towards eliminating it. And you're quite right to draw attention to that. Do you think that the public debate on this issue is well informed? Is the media playing its part in actually letting people understand what's at stake here?

DOUGLAS: Sporadically, I do. I mean I don't think they really understand for instance how much Russia, for economic reasons, would like to eliminate much, much more the amount of weapons they have. I'm very concerned for instance about all those submarines that are sitting up there in the North Sea and the amount of possibilities of stolen uranium or enriched plutonium. And, you know, it was also interesting with the Pakistani doctor in terms of Libya coming out and talking about where it got its abilities too. So I think if there is a positive element of terrorism I think it is going to bring more attention to the issues of what nuclear weapons can do.

THAROOR: Well, let me turn away from the big weapons really to the small ones. We have something behind you that shows small hand guns and of course I know that a lot of your activism on arms issues focuses on handguns and smaller weapons, which is not to move away from your very justified priority for nuclear weapons but one could argue that you've worked in a field, Michael, in a profession, which has promoted a fascination with guns and weapons like this. Lethal weapons, if I can borrow a phrase. Can the film industry and the media in general do more to take the glamour out of guns or is the fascination with weapons a basic instinct to use another title?

DOUGLAS: You know, Shashi, the only way I can answer that is that the same movie that is shown in the United States is shown in Canada and is shown in Japan, which has a tremendous desire for violent movies. Yet, there is nowhere near the number of handgun deaths in either one of those countries because they just don't have them. So, yes, I think that we certainly have some kind of responsibility but to always point one's finger at the entertainment industry as the one that's promoting the violence as opposed to the accessibility of weapons that exist in this country – by last count I mean there's roughly I think 650 million small arms in the world of which 260 million are in the United States alone. That's like literally one weapon for every man, woman and child. So it's a situation that I'm not – I respect the rights to bear arms and all of that but it's been totally taken out of context.

THAROOR: One country where it was taken out of all proportion was Albania and I remember a year after Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed you a UN Messenger of Peace you took a trip out to Albania to visit a UN disarmament project where half a million military weapons and tons of ammunition had fallen into the hands of the civilian population. Can you tell us a little bit about that trip? What you saw there and the kind of--

DOUGLAS: Yes. That was a programme under Under-Secretary-General Jayantha Dhanapala, who used to be here before and has since left, which was basically trading arms for jobs and was encouraging the Albanians, province by province, to turn in their weapons and replace that by jobs in terms of road building and telephone constructions and communications lines. And it was interesting. Albania is like the Wild West and it's been a struggle. I mean most everywhere it's been a struggle to eliminate that so it worked to some degree. I've not followed up recently to know how well it's done.

THAROOR: Actually, it's done reasonably well.

DOUGLAS: Has it?

THAROOR: And I think the impact of that project has been fairly lasting. But let's turn to another part of the world where you've also travelled to for the UN. You went to West Africa quite recently, a part of the world where some estimates say there are nearly as many as eight million small arms, at least half of which of course are being used for illegal purposes. Can you tell us what brought you to Sierra Leone?

DOUGLAS: We were working on a documentary involving child soldiers and one of the most combustible combinations is children and small arms because they're fairly light and mobile to carry. It doesn't take a lot of strength to pull a trigger and most children don't have a history of moral responsibility. So it's very easy to brainwash kids into creating the kind of atrocities that we've seen. And so we did a documentary tracing some children after the war because 80 percent of the population of Sierra Leone was moved during the civil war and a lot

of kids lost contact with their mothers and fathers. And so we dealt – this is already a year and a half since the civil war has been over – in terms of trying to track a couple of kids and organizations to try to bring children back together with their parents.

THAROOR: I remember you met a boy called Abu, I believe. A young boy. Can you remember his life story? Tell us a little bit about him.

DOUGLAS: Well, you know, Abu had been kidnapped and picked up by the guerrillas coming through – most of them coming back from Liberia in that civil war – and had been in the brush for about five or six years. And when the war was over really had lost touch about where his family was. And, of course, the other problem with these kids – I’m talking about 12 or 13 years old – is when they come home it’s not like your mother can discipline you or anything like that. They have no sense of family ties. And so we just sort of made an effort to try to track down and find Abu’s family.

THAROOR: Right. Well, that could be fascinating. So let’s show our audience a clip from this very moving documentary [“What’s Going On?”] with Michael Douglas talking to a young boy, Abu, a former child soldier in Sierra Leone.

VIDEO ROLL-IN:

DOUGLAS: [IN FRENCH] Abu is very smart, yes?

Do you have a song?

What?

Sing for me, please.

Please.

A song...?

DOUGLAS: [IN ENGLISH] I have a song for my – I have a song for my boy. It used to go: “I love you a bushel and a peck, a bushel and a peck and a hug around your neck. A hug around your neck and a barrel in the peep. A barrel in the peep and I’m talking in my sleep about you, about me, about you. So I love you.”

ABU: [SPEAKS IN LOCAL DIALECTT]

TRANSLATOR: He’s gonna sing a song for you.

ABU: [SINGING] “It’s good to praise the Lord, hallelujah. It’s good to praise the Lord, hallelujah. Praise the Lord, hallelujah, praise the Lord, hallelujah. [CONTINUES SINGING IN LOCAL DIALECT]

DOUGLAS: Very nice. Very, very nice. Bravo.

VIDEO OUT

THAROOR: That was very nice, Michael. Bravo to you. Now how did you know how to break through to that young boy, Abu Bakr, who had been separated from his family during the conflict and suffered so much?

DOUGLAS: Well, obviously when you have a documentary you don't see in the film the efforts of trying. And we had tried a number of different ways and it just turned out that song – this was just one of many ways we tried that finally kind of – he broke through. He was a tough cookie, you know, and all of a sudden to see the child begin to come back is what I saw.

THAROOR: That's right, the child in him. Well, the quest to reunite this child, this boy, with his mother is sort of a dramatic thread that runs through your 30-minute documentary. Did you always believe when you started out that it was going to be possible to find her or did you pretty much find that you were giving up hope after a while?

DOUGLAS: No, I did not think it was possible. You know, he was one of the last children in the camp who had not been able to and really did not expect it and it was curious how these documentarians were going to resolve this documentary. But I did not think it was going to happen.

THAROOR: Well, I know, Michael, it's not a good practice in Hollywood when you're talking about a film to give away the ending but in this case let's show our audience how the search for Abu's mother turned out.

VIDEO ROLL-IN:

DOUGLAS: No one here knows Abu or his family so we trudge on.

The search has been so draining I can't imagine what Abu is going through.

Exhausted, we reach the next village ... and sit down to wait for the chief. Suddenly, Abu jumps up as a woman rushes towards him.

It's incredible to see Abu in his mother's arms. [SOUND OF CRYING]

I'm overwhelmed. I never expected to see Abu reunited with his family.

VIDEO OUT

THAROOR: So perhaps real life does imitate the movies. I'm a sucker for a happy ending like that.

DOUGLAS: No, I was really impressed. And it was an opportunity to see some of the incredible NGO groups that are in there. For instance the IRC, in this particular case I think, works so closely with the United Nations and in so many areas and the really great work they're doing.

THAROOR: The UN wouldn't get anywhere in the world without the partners we have and that includes people like you. I can't think of too many people who would leave a life of

luxury you're able to lead where you are and go out to that place in the back of beyond and help tell the story. That was really fabulous.

DOUGLAS: Thank you. It's a small gesture when you're as fortunate as I have been.

THAROOR: But you were able now in doing that not only to be involved with this extraordinary human story but also to see the work of UN peacekeepers up close. What impression did that make on you, Michael?

DOUGLAS: Well, we were staying in a Pakistani camp and I'm also amazed at which countries are the first ones to support the peacekeeping forces because a lot of time it seems to be similar countries – Bangladesh, Pakistan, India amongst others – that were there. And I think, and it's a lesson well told in terms of the US' position in Iraq. Because you see these peacekeeping forces integrate into these communities and what an integral part they are and how well respected they are and a bridge certainly between the administration going on in Freetown versus what's going on in the field and a rewarding sense of accomplishments. I was very impressed at a lot of the work they did.

THAROOR: You're being characteristically modest because I gather you actually stepped in to help a project you saw that was going on that the peacekeepers were involved in.

DOUGLAS: I contributed some money to a football – what you call football I call soccer – stadium in the Koidu area that we were in in Sierra Leone.

THAROOR: And this was for the kids in the area or is it for other—

DOUGLAS: For their community. You know, this was the area which is really in Sierra Leone where most of all the devastation took place because of where the diamonds are, which is really what it was all about. It was controlling the diamonds and the use of diamonds in currency and this was seeing them come into the terrorist organizations and how they used them. They're easily transferred across borders. And this town was completely gutted and in a strange way the symbol of a football stadium, or place where they actually could come together, come back together and can play sports, appeared from where I was very important. So I just tried to contribute some money to make it all happen.

THAROOR: Well, thank you. That's really an important gesture. Now, I'm going to turn you away from the field and back to headquarters. I mean you walked into the building today to come and do this interview. There's a famous statue of a twisted gun, a revolver with its barrel tied in a knot which is sculpted and placed outside the entrance to UN Headquarters. The Swedish artist that did this, Carl Reuterswärd, said that he was motivated to make that whole statue by the murder of John Lennon. I know John Lennon was a friend of yours; did his death affect your own thinking about guns as well?

DOUGLAS: His death was what really motivated me to get involved with hand gun control. Yes, I knew John. He was a friend. I lived only about two blocks away from him. I was walking past the Dakota House that night when it did happen so that left a lasting effect for me as far as small arms and in the big picture really in trying to find my father's roots. My father comes from Belarus. I tried to do some homework in a town where he came from, which is on the Ukrainian border, and realized that this town was downwind of Chernobyl and it's gone. It's eliminated. So that sort of played an integral part. And I just would love to see in my lifetime – I was born in 1944, the year of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and also the creation of the United Nations – and just sort of see in my lifetime, and would like to believe, that there can be an end to nuclear weapons. So it's what I'd like to try to do.

THAROOR: Certainly I think many of our viewers will share your hopes. Now we saw earlier how you managed to break through and communicate to that young boy in Sierra Leone and I wonder, Michael, if I could take this opportunity to celebrate a fellow performer of yours and a great friend of the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, who recently passed away. And this is Sir Peter Ustinov. Here he is on the set of **World Chronicle**, this very show, in 1985.

USTINOV: Children look at you with such expectation because you've come a long way and they've been dressed up and dolled up and they're looking for something to happen. And I reflected on this. I started it in Thailand and I have since carried it out in various parts of the world which is that I suddenly and unexpectedly bark. [BARKS] They're very alarmed because they're pretty sure that I'm not a dog.

THAROOR: Well, Michael I—

DOUGLAS: I do a pretty good cat.

THAROOR: Do you really? [LAUGHTER]

DOUGLAS: Meow.

THAROOR: All right. Maybe that might be something that you could try the next time you're trying to break a kid out of his misery, but seriously, apart from the meow here on this set, is there a trick that you use as an icebreaker generally as a way to bridge the distance with people from different places and cultures? Make them laugh, make them relax?

DOUGLAS: You know, the big advantage you have mostly is that they know you. It's the strangest thing in the world is that internationally wherever you go – and I'm shocked because particularly now because of videos and DVDs – wherever you go people know you. So there's a bit of a comfort factor there which makes it easier so I haven't had to work on my bark yet but I may.

THAROOR: Well, I like that. I like that meow already. Now, Michael, we're coming to the end of this conversation but I do want to remember that in addition to your very strong commitment on disarmament issues you've also been an activist on another issue of great importance to the United Nations and that's the fight against HIV/AIDS. Can you tell us briefly about that?

DOUGLAS: You know, growing up I think a lot of it has to do even more recently with my wife, Catherine, who is out of the theatre and musicals and talks often about how many people she has lost in that area. But I see the biggest concern – and I was so happy to see Secretary-General Annan make this, in his second tour, in terms of focusing on Africa where this is just out of control. And it really is a lost continent between HIV/AIDS and some of the terrible civil wars that really are not reported internationally the way they are in the West or in Europe. So it's an issue but I think it is fairly financially well-supported and pretty well organized at this point.

THAROOR: Thank you, Michael. Well, unfortunately, that's all we have time for. There's a great deal more Michael could have told us about his contributions to the Open Media Fund and Afghanistan, his work on the film "Traffic", which highlighted drug issues, but we leave that for another day.

Thank you all for being with us on this special edition of **World Chronicle** with UN Messenger of Peace, Michael Douglas. Thank you, Michael, thank you all for listening. I'm Shashi Tharoor and we invite you to join us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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

World Chronicle

United Nations, Room S-827

New York, N.Y., 10017.

Or by email at: besa@un.org

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