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Session II: Major Political Crises Facing the UN

B. Lynn Pascoe

UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs

Gillian Sorensen: Our next speaker is a fellow American: his name is Lynn Pascoe, and he is Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs. He's had a distinguished career as a Foreign Service official. He was our Ambassador in Indonesia and in Malaysia, and he served in the United Nations as Special Advisor to the US Mission to the UN from 1993-1996. He has served in many other places, but given the limits of time I won't go through that in great detail. May I introduce to you, Ambassador Lynn Pascoe.

Lynn Pascoe: Thank you very much; I appreciate having the opportunity to talk with everyone. We have been chasing around as we do almost every day here, it seems, on some crisis that's running around. As I keep saying regularly, at the United Nations, if we're dealing with a problem, it usually means someone else has been working on the problem and they've worked on it for a while and haven't had much success, so they can't take credit for solving it, and they hand it to us and say, you guys now fix this problem. That probably doesn't happen in the next week or two after that, needless to say, but it means that we have endless challenges to try to deal with issues that do not really fit into any cookie cutter, easy thing. When I'm around with humanitarian groups and talking to them, we seem to have the same list of counties we're working on, and we keep at it and keep trying to move forward.

But it is a real pleasure for me to have the chance to talk to you about some of the things that we're trying to do, how we see the world, and what we're trying to do about it. I think if you go around and talk about the various places where we are working in the political department or with our colleagues down the hall in the peacekeeping department – and we do work extremely closely together – we are hitting a list of just about every place that you get on your headlines each day. Places like Somalia, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Sudan, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Guinea-Bissau, Nepal – we can go on and on. Some of the places that problems have not been solved for 30 or 40 years, like Cyprus or Western Sahara, we still keep at it and still keep working on it. Some of them actually look better than they have for years.

I think the important thing is that not only are these problems out there, but we are really charged to be working on them, to try to resolve them, and the main thing that we are trying to do is make sure we're doing a better job at it. The Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, is very much in the mode of, yes, I know the world's got problems out there, and I know you're working on it, but what have you accomplished? What are you doing? How do you really make this work and how do you move forward in the process. I think that in that area, we have tried to develop our tools, tried to develop our approaches.

We have several methods out there that we're using. It seems to be, when the Secretary-General has been talking about it, is that in the past, we've been a little too quick probably to go for peacekeeping efforts, which now have us up to 110-115,000 people in the field, which basically makes us only second to the US for the kinds of military forces they have in the field, and that's too many for an organization like this and being able to manage, and it's hard to get resources and money. Of course these are all volunteer forces; it's hard to get the countries to send the forces. We also think that there's got to be other ways that we can resolve these issues.

So what we're trying to do is to be more professional in the way that we try to do the crisis prevention in a diplomatic way. We're trying to make sure our mediation efforts are a lot better. In some areas we do this ourselves; in many areas we do it with regional groupings or other people that have been involved in the field. We try very hard to bring together the best group of pressure that we can find, and then use of course our own reputation for our impartiality to be the one to bring it all together.

In the past, I think one of our problems had been that people did a lot of talking about how we resolve conflicts and what we should be doing out there, and of course the UN tradition on this goes back to Ralph Bunche, and we have been involved in trying to mediate settlements and bring things together for a very long time. But in most of the cases it was thought that we could put a little money and a few people into this and that would be all that's required. In fact, I think the recognition has been in the last couple years that we have to bring a lot more resources – some of them are on-budget resources, and a lot of them are extra-budgetary resources, where people will give us help to work on the outside.

We also have tried to make sure that our work is, as I say, plug-and-play on various issues, between us, the peacekeeping department, the other parts of the UN system, and in fact even regional organizations. So we have something in the political department called the Mediation Support Unit, which has, in the first instance, its own people that are working on issues. Some are experts, of course we have our regional experts in the political department, but we also have a standby team that has been very generously supported by the Norwegians over the last year, where we pick out about five out of a group of 500 or 600 that were interested, to actually serve as a SWAT team to go out. We have them on the road a good part of the time bringing their specific expertise in support of the regular UN mediation efforts.

For example, we've had people that are real authorities on governments, constitutions, power-sharing, etc., working in Cyprus with our team there. We've had people, even one person who's an authority on water issues, who's been very valuable in Central Asia, where that's one of their critical sources of crisis and problems between the countries in the region. We have tried to make sure that our elections unit, which has a quite good reputation around the world, is strong and is moving out to work. In the peacekeeping department, they're working on setting up a police rule of law unit that is more effective than we have been in the past. Again, in some places like Nepal, for example, we've had a fairly sizable mission, but without any active peacekeepers on the ground we've had a fairly sizable police contingent there that helps and works on it.

So our idea is that we will try to either have the resources of our own, or know where to get those resources, be able to reach out and bring them in to an international community effort to solve problems. I'll give you a few examples of the kind of things that we have tried to do. For example, when Kenya fell apart after the elections in the end of the rioting and the killings and the problems, we immediately got people on the ground to be out there, and then tried to work for a high-level mediator. Originally we were going to do it with the head of the African Union, and then it turned out that Kofi Annan was going to be more of a choice of the people on the ground, which was fine with us. We provided support for, and continued to provide support for, up until the time when they had other international support that had the money to back him and the units to go behind him.

We have been, as you know, in Cyprus, been in an effort to mediate that dispute for many, many years. Now we have the leaders on both sides of the island who are very interested in a settlement at some point, we have former Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, that is there working with the two sides; we've beefed up our effort there. That process has been going along relatively smoothly, if not incredibly fast. All of us would like everything to move faster than we really get done.

Our effort would be that if we see a crisis, to try to get somebody out on the ground within a few days or a week at the maximum. In Madagascar, as things declined and the demonstrations on the street grew and grew, we were in Addis Ababa with the Secretary-General for the African Union meeting. We sent the Secretary-General, and I sent my deputy, who's very experienced in this kind of thing, immediately to Madagascar to be working it. Then we bring within a week or two or three, some other highly respected person to sort of lead the effort. In a place like that we're working both with the AU, with several international – with several countries that are very interested in the area and are working together. As always with these things, the results are never as fast as we'd like. Sometimes there may or may not be results, but we keep working and pushing, and what we do provide – and it does seem to me in an area like that, we have managed and succeeded in keeping any major loss of life in the process, try to push people in the right direction, and hopefully there will be some kind of agreement there in the not-too-distant future on how to go forward.

In sum, we see the role of the UN to be out there trying to solve conflicts, to work with people around the world, to work with other units, to work with other organizations, to work with regional organizations. We even sent some of our people, for example, when the African Union had a mission to the Comoros trying to work on it there, we put some of our experts on that team as part of their team. We're willing, and we have been planning to do more of that. We try to do a lot of training, capacity-building, first and foremost with ourselves, to make sure we're better, that we know what we're doing. We have set up a website that is intended to pull in all of the best practices on mediation and negotiation. Anybody can access it, it's called the Peacemaker site, to see several hundred agreements and how this has been done in this country, what are the best practices to get that done.

We have no patent on what we do; we're trying to spread the expertise as much as we possibly can, mainly because the amount of work out there is enormous, and we really are not going to be able to ever have the resources here to solve all these problems. And sometimes the UN is not in the best position to do that, it should be local neighbors, friends, regional organizations, and we want to help them to try to make the places safer, and take away some of these great problems.

The last thing I should say is that we are working very much here in-house not only on the question of peacekeeping and what its role is, trying to improve the role of our peacemaking and mediation efforts, but we're also working very much on this much talked about but often misunderstood area of peace-building. Of what do we do to keep countries from relapsing; how do we keep them in this period between a crisis and before they are able to sustain some kind of a process of their own internal areas which would – usually development and other programs are sufficient to help them. What do we do? What is the most effective? How do we make that work all together?

The political department has some political missions abroad that we actually call peace-building missions, that we're trying to develop the techniques to help the country make the transition. We do not want to be in this process for a long time; these are not long-term missions, but they're meant really as a transitory process. We're also making sure that in the peacekeeping missions, that these are after all peace-building missions at the same time, that it is working from the very first and all the way through. This problem has been one of our longstanding weaknesses, and it's an area where we're trying to do a lot better. We're not there yet, but we'll keep working on it, and try to make sure that the maximum ability that we have here at the UN can be effectively used. With that let me stop, and I'm happy to answer question on issues that you're interested in.

Question: I'd like to turn to Somalia, and ask you what can and should be done, and particularly, what's happening on the issue of piracy. And one related question, the United States has a number of special envoys, and the UN has a number of special envoys going to areas such as Sudan, etc. Do you see any possibility from your UN diplomat perspective, as well as your former US diplomat perspective, of coordination between these special envoys?

Lynn Pascoe: Well, let me say on the last part first, we try to coordinate very closely with all of the other players on this issue. In that respect, not because I'm American, but the US plays sort of a special role as a superpower role, where it's out there doing something – sometimes a lot, sometimes not much – in almost every crisis that we've got out there. This is not true of most other countries in the world. We have some countries that are very deeply concerned about specific areas. For example, Madagascar, which I mentioned, of course the French have a very strong interest in Madagascar. Sierra Leone, the British have a very strong interest. And the regional countries will tend to have more of an interest in that than they will in someplace abroad. But in that core group in most of these places, you will have the Americans involved to some degree, just because they have a global policy that works across the board.

Somalia – about a year and a half ago, the Secretary-General became very frustrated because every time he said, what's going on in Somalia, people said, let's talk about Darfur, or let's talk about something else. Let's talk about anything but Somalia. The Blackhawk Down syndrome was there very much; nobody wanted to talk about it, nobody wanted to hear anything about it. And so the Secretary-General said, 'Okay Pascoe, we're going to start working on this issue. We're really going to figure out what we're going to do with this over time.'

So we appointed a very active and seasoned and very good special representative, Ould Abdallah, who really started working all of the process, all of the guys on all sides of this issue, to make the TFG – the Transitional Federal Government, which was very dysfunctional at the time – to move it towards a direction where we could have agreements, a broader perspective. And that became the Djibouti Process, which became in the end the development of a new government, new people, designed to reach out to as many factions as possible in Somalia. The Security Council has come in behind that and said, 'Yeah, we told you we weren't going to do anything on that until you guys had a political process going, and now we see a political process going there, so we can go halfway on this issue.'

This was a decision in December, which was, we will help support AMISOM [African Union Mission to Somalia], the African group that is there, Burundi and Ugandan forces. We will give them support, both assessed support, but we think you should go out and build a trust fund with a pledging conference, which we did a week ago, which the Secretary-General led, which was really quite effective, but also start putting money into these government forces.

When the Djibouti agreement was made, the people that backed the new president and the people that were backing the old president made a deal that they would put in 5,000 of each side to make a security force. We now need to support that, we have been supporting it some through UNDP, and we're going to continue. And that will build up, in hopefully a few months, we will begin to see the effects of this, and then the Security Council will decide what it does next, and obviously we work with them as they make their decisions.

Piracy, of course, is a headline-grabber – one reason is because a lot of people, like myself, read a lot of pirate stories when they were a kid and it always has a certain romance about it, even if this is the most unromantic business in the world, but nevertheless it seemed like that when I was 8 years old. The other part of it is that it is so disruptive of world commerce, through a very active waterway. But the truth of the matter is, you can only deal with piracy if you are working on conditions on the ground and putting in a more lawful approach on the ground. It's a symptom of a totally lawless area. As you all may remember, Blackbeard operated off the North Carolina coast back when there was nobody there doing anything, and so he could run it – and all the pirates in the Caribbean, those were lawless places.

And so Somalia is a modern manifestation of that that has been there when you have total lawlessness on land of a fairly sea-faring people, they go out and grab all these ships, and if you make a couple million bucks in a day, that's not bad wages. So you've got to protect the ships, but you've really got to fix the problem on land, and that's what we're trying to do on both sides.

Question: There's been some confusion lately about whether Fiji has been barred from future peacekeeping missions because of the coup. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said he had successfully lobbied the UN to do so. I was wondering if you could clear up that situation and clarify it.

Question: My question concerns Macedonia and the name issue. I was wondering if you could comment – given the fact that the UN Resolution 817 on the name of Macedonia and its entry into the United Nations, which basically makes the country negotiate its name with Greece in order to enter the United Nations, and given the fact that it breaks the principles of self-determination and sovereignty of a state, as well as the UN Charter, especially the articles on admission of a state, what are the mechanisms and is there a possibility in the near future [of putting this issue on the] human rights agenda.

Question: I would like you to comment on the role of the non-state actor in the work that you're doing, particularly with reference to Pakistan and what's going on, where it seems that non-state actors may have more power than the state actors.

Lynn Pascoe: I think people always say those are great questions when they don't have an answer for any of them, but let me make a try at all of them. On Fiji, I have the best answer – the most straightforward answer that I can do is that there has been for some time an understanding that the missions of peacekeepers in Fiji will not increase. There are not very many. There are a relatively small number of military peacekeepers; there are more, actually, police, which were not involved in the coup and in fact tried to oppose the coup. And the largest group of them are [sic] actually on a separate private contract to protect our people, my mission in Iraq, in Baghdad.

So it is three different categories of people. There are not a large number of Fiji peacekeepers out there. The UN has never laid out a criteria [sic] for the peacekeepers, if they behave well, etc., because quite frankly, it is not all that easy to get peacekeepers.

There is a bit of a facetious line that goes around here: if I can find another hundred-and-some people that will go out and protect my people, if some country wants to volunteer those to protect my people in Iraq, then we can talk about whether we could do without the Fiji peacekeepers. But we do need to have protection for our people out there, and that sometimes is an agreement that, as with all politics, is not necessarily ideal.

The same, I think, would apply on Macedonia, which, for those of you who don't know, is known in the UN as FYROM, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The UN has had an envoy working on that for a very long time – Matt Nimitz, who does report to me, has been there working this issue. It is one of those that by any logic you would think would have been resolved a decade ago, if not longer, but still continues to linger, and one that we work quite diligently on. We remain hopeful that we can fix it, but it hasn't been [fixed] in the past. There doesn't seem to be any movement in the Security Council to change the resolution that I have seen or heard of, so if that's not going to be done, we have to do it with the tools that we have, which is to try to resolve it by negotiations.

The question of non-state actors is of course one that bedevils us across the world and has in lots of different areas; you have in Pakistan, obviously Afghanistan, huge issues of this. We have the terrorism problem around the world that's out there as a big one. We just had two of our UN people released that were working on Sahel issues, Ambassador Fowler and Mr. Guay. And then we had Mr. Solecki that was held as a hostage in Baluchistan, all clearly done by non-state actors, clearly out there to press and to make changes in their own name.

Another area that I would mention that is a huge problem for us is drug traffickers, particularly in West Africa, where they're growing with power. As we all know, you can generate enormous amounts of cash that way. We've got drugs going from South America to Europe by way of West Africa. So in any of these areas, we deal an awful lot with the problem on non-state actors. In many ways, one of our biggest challenges on peacekeeping is that the ideology was set up at a time when you had 2 states that were having a fight, they quit having a fight and negotiated something, and you went in there and put a symbolic force in-between and everybody was happy, everybody agreed that this was for some reason: a reason not to get [back] into a fight. Non-state actors, by and large, don't take that same benign view of having somebody in-between their goal and where they are.

And that makes our life a lot more complicated, as we've seen in the Congo and in Sudan. I should also just mention in this regard that as we deal with these groups, and I mentioned the counter-terrorism, but the targeting of the UN for us is a very big security problem. As you know, the UN presence abroad was very spread out, it was intentionally in the neighborhoods, each agency would set up its own office in some house somewhere, and a lot of that is really untenable at a time when we're being targeted so seriously, so we do have a big security problem; again, from non-state actors.

Question: I was wondering if you could speak to the Palestinian internal division; you said before that if left unaddressed it would just get worse and it had just gotten worse, and also the role of Hamas and how to deal with Hamas.

Lynn Pascoe: There are two or three different problems here together. One, let me just mention in the first instance, the serious problem with Gaza, where we worked very hard and as you know, UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East] feeds something like 70-75% of the population, and another 10% or so is done by the World Food Programme. The place is in bad shape, and it's been in bad shape for a long time. We keep trying to get the borders open to Israel; we haven't had much success. Part of the problem – we have over \$4 billion that was pledged to go to the reconstruction of Gaza, but we can't get anyone in to reconstruct, so the money is not available to use.

You have several groups, you have the huge division between the Palestinians themselves, which the Egyptians have been trying to work on but it doesn't seem to be going anywhere fast. You have the problems with both the Egyptians and the Israelis keeping the border closed, and you have the Palestinian Authority not wanting Hamas to get any more credit for anything in Gaza, so it is a very complex mix that frankly does not look more optimistic today than it did a few months ago. We keep working on it; the Egyptians have been working hard to produce something, and as always with Middle East conflict problems, it just seems to go on and on, unfortunately.

Thank you very much.