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YUN Interview  
Ambassador Roberto Guyer  
November 1, 1990  
Interviewed by James S. Sutterlin

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JS Ambassador Guyer, I wanted first to thank you for agreeing to participate in this Yale University Oral History Project on the United Nations, and I would like, if I might, to begin to ask you about the role you played in the 1973 war in the Middle East. That is, in particular, the efforts to bring about disengagement between Syria and Israel.

AG Thank you very much and it is a great pleasure for me to be able to participate in this program. Yes, in 1973, at the office of the Secretary-General, we saw the stumbling block, but there were no relations between the United States and Syria. So, there was no possibility for a disengagement of the same magnitude as had happened between Israel and Egypt. The Secretary-General asked me then to go to the Middle East and speak with President Assad and Mrs. Meir.

JS This was Secretary-General Waldheim?

AG This was Secretary-General Waldheim. I went in 1973 there. I was accompanied by a UN official that was in the region at that time -- Mr. Remi Gorge -- and spoke to the President of Syria and the Prime Minister of Israel. We could not get any concrete results, but we found out which would be the basis for an understanding so that a disengagement could be reached. That mission was presented, especially in the Israeli press, as that I had gone exclusively to see the

situation of the Israeli prisoners in Syria. When I came back, I informed Secretary-General Waldheim, and Dr. Kissinger, hearing of the mission, asked to see me. So I flew to Washington, had an interview with him, and presented the positions as had been expressed to me by both President Assad and Prime Minister Meir. Dr. Kissinger thought that there were sufficient elements for a disengagement to which I concurred. I said it would be possible for the US to have a successful solution of the question and Dr. Kissinger decided to go to the region. The outcome was favorable.

JS That's very interesting. What were the positions of the President of Syria, at that point, and Prime Minister Meir? How did you assess what they had to say?

AG Well, the question was, where the cease-fire line was, or better said, the exact location of the positions of Syria and Israel for the cease-fire ending. There was one place which the Syrians claimed they held to the end, and which the Israelis said they had taken before. And then the question effectively of the prisoners, and there I remember that President Assad told me that they were very well treated. He then insisted that it was not so much a question of the Geneva Conventions, but the honor of Syria which demanded that they should be well handled. He made a point, however, that all those pilots that had fallen in the hands of the Syrian military were all perfectly well kept. Naturally, there had been excesses, he said, when they fell

in the hands of a population that was enraged, he told me, because of bombardments, and things like that. So he didn't exclude the possibility of victims, but he stressed that it was a question of popular action and not by the military.

JS Now, before you undertook this mission did the Americans know that you were going? Did they know that you would have contact with Assad?

AG I'm not totally sure. I would imagine, yes. I'm nearly sure of that, yes. So much so that Dr. Kissinger knew the moment I came back.

JS And was it an important element in Assad's receiving you, so to speak, the fact that Syria had been invited, although it did not attend, the Geneva Conference, the so-called peace conference?

AG Yes, I think it was important.

JS That provided a UN framework, so to speak.

AG Exactly. That is correct.

JS I asked how you perceived the position of President Assad, at that point, on the possibility of some kind of contact. What about Prime Minister Meir? How did you see her attitude at the time?

AG Her attitude was very clear cut and very firm, and she objected strenuously to the fact that President Assad had said that the question of the prisoners could not be solved until there was an understanding on the territorial aspects of the cease-fire. She said it was immoral that one should

make a bargain of human beings against land, and, in a way, she said she was astonished that the UN transmitted a bargain. I said it was not for the UN to pass moral judgments on that, but I drew to her attention that during the war of India and Pakistan of 1971 the question of the 97 thousand Pakistani prisoners was linked to a solution between India and Pakistan; and that the Viet Nam conference of Paris of 1973 also had linked the situation between prisoners and a general arrangement. So these were things which were happening at the moment. But I did not enter into either the legal or the moral aspects of it.

JS Then when Kissinger shuttle did begin, were there continuing contacts between Kissinger and the 38th floor of the United Nations?

AG Yes.

JS How was this done?

AG Well, it goes on in all sorts of ways, either telephonically between Dr. Kissinger and Dr. Waldheim. I would say that would have been a primary source. There were some meetings which took place. It was fluid, I wouldn't say on a regular basis, but it did take place.

JS And Dr. Kissinger didn't ignore the United Nations then at that point?

AG No, not at all, on the contrary. And there also was quite a contact between State Department officials and UN officials, definitely. Buffum, Atherton, Oakley and so forth.

JS And as the agreement ultimately emerged, the UN had a role on the ground. Isn't that true?

AG Exactly. It did have because the UN had its observers both in the Sinai and in Golan.

JS I think that's the only questions I have of that particular episode. I would like to go back a little bit in history. You served at the United Nations also with Secretary-General U Thant . . .

AG That is correct.

JS and were able to observe him. One of the crucial developments in his tenure was the earlier war in the Middle East in 1967 when, in fact, the UN peacekeeping forces were withdrawn. As you worked with U Thant and observed him, did you see in his subsequent conduct of affairs any evidence of his continuing sensitivity and concern for that decision?

AG Yes, I would say very clearly. I also served during the last year of his tenure as Senior Political Advisor and he spoke to me a couple of times on that question. And then in July 1971 we reached the conclusion that there would be a war between India and Pakistan on the question over what was then called East Pakistan. So I went to see U Thant and told him that I thought that in that year '71 the war would break out and, therefore, he had the obligation to advise the members of the Security Council according to Article 99 of the Charter. And then he recalled the '67 episode and told me one thing which he had mentioned to me before. That

is that the Security Council would not accept it, would look with disfavor on that demarche. That is what had happened in '67 when he was thinking of going to the Security Council, but he had been told that he would only embarrass the members of the Security Council. They would not act, and therefore it would have no practical consequences except this embarrassment and a not good relationship that would ensue. I said yes. And in this case it would be the same thing. But this was a question of historical responsibility. According to Article 99, he not only could but should. Secondly, it would throw the responsibility on the Security Council. The moment he informed the Security Council it ceased to be his responsibility and became the responsibility of the Security Council. If the Security Council acted or not, that ceased to be his problem. But historically he had fulfilled his mission as Secretary-General. And I finished saying in this way we would avoid - - we, the UN, the UN Secretariat would avoid -- the responsibility in this, so he should send that note. So that note was very hastily written, the main writer was Brian Urquhart. But then I said to U Thant, "Listen, this is a note of the most important consequence, and your main advisors are all in Geneva, i.e. your legal council, Stavropoulos, Ismat Kittani, and Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, who was the focal point for East Pakistan." And he said, "Well, go immediately to Geneva and speak with all of them,

and then consider this text, see it through and come back immediately." I left for Geneva, and on that same day when I arrived I had a meeting at the house Belle Rive of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan where Stavropoulos, Kittani, and myself, and the Prince, of course, were the participants. Some changes were done to the note. Everybody was in agreement that there was an absolute necessity for sending the note. I went back immediately the next day to New York and spoke with U Thant who sent the letter to the Security Council.

JS To the President of the Security Council.

AG Yes, which, as had been foreseen, was not well received. I think it wasn't even acknowledged. The Security Council didn't want to have anything to do with it, which was exactly what had happened in '67.

JS What would've happened, because in '67 he didn't really . . .

AG Exactly, that would have happened in '67, but he felt afterwards, in a way, a sense of relief that he did it now and that he should have done it possibly then. But it was his great consideration for the Security Council and the members and so forth. Practical consequences that note didn't have.

JS But it was a formal invocation of his responsibility under Article 99?

AG Exactly.

JS Because sometimes it's not listed.

AG No, we discussed whether we should mention Article 99 or not. I said that the question was certainly immaterial. When you act within the law you don't have to specify which is the legal basis under the Charter.

JS I'd like to, in the few minutes we have, go to a different subject. You were on the 38th floor in a senior position at the time of transition and the election of a new Secretary-General, Mr. Waldheim. Could you describe the process, the election process, as you saw it from inside the Secretariat, so to speak -- how a Secretary-General is selected and found. How does it work?

AG Well, this is a very complex thing. At the beginning, everybody asked U Thant to continue. The moment he made public his irrevocable decision not to present himself to a third term the process started. Of course, we knew not too much, either. The Secretary-General at one moment asked me to be present at the meetings of the Security Council. I thought that it wouldn't be advisable. So in the actual discussions I didn't take part. And then there were various currents -- there was, of course, the position of the Chinese who wanted definitely a Third World candidate, and were finally convinced to lift their veto against Waldheim. Five years later, they were insisting on the same theory, and I remember they were insisting up to a point. I remember having, five years later, a conversation with my Chinese colleague, Tan Ming Chao. I said to him, "Listen,

will you maintain your veto against Waldheim or not, because you are saying that it must be a Third World candidate?" And then I got the answer, "Yes, you are perfectly right. It must be a good Third World candidate." And then I more or less got the message. Now what did actually happen is very difficult to know -- what was the question, what was the origin of the Soviet veto against my own fellow countryman?

JS And one of the important things that emerges from your answer, though, and I think it is good to have it on record, is that normally the Secretariat, itself, does not have an important role in the election of a Secretary-General. There is, though, another question in this respect. You've mentioned the election of Secretary-General Waldheim for his second term. Was there any utilization that you observed of his staff on the 38th floor in order to promote his continuing tenure in the office?

AG No, I would say no, but on the other hand, of course, he was a candidate, he evidently wanted to be a candidate. So as to his immediate entourage, I mean in his own interior cabinet, etc., if there was any activity in his favor, yes, I would imagine so. But the question, I think, would be more aptly asked if it did not have any relevance. I don't think that it had any great relevance.

JS Which confirms again the point that the Secretariat really has no role in this process.

AG And I think this is a very healthy situation because international civil servants as civil servants in an international government should always have an unnamed loyalty towards their superiors and should not get involved in these matters.

JS You, though, in a senior position, observed closely the management exercised by two Secretaries-General in the United Nations. The question arises, should there be specific qualifications that one searches for, and some way of doing this? From your experience, did you see a particular weakness in the management capacity of either U Thant or Waldheim which would point to certain lessons for the future?

AG No. I think this is a post which is evolving. It did not exist in the whole history, international history, an impartial third. This is a twentieth century phenomenon. And in all the missions I had in the Middle East, for instance, and also the first time I went to Moscow, invited by the Soviet Union as co-chairman of the Geneva process -- my wife asked me, "What will you tell the Soviets that they don't know?" So, what was the object of the trip? I was very well received by the Soviet Union. And then I found out why, because the members of the UN Secretariat were the only ones who spoke with everybody. The Soviet Union had no relations with Israel, with Saudi Arabia. With some of their friends contacts were sometimes tense. The United

States had no contact with the PLO, and also with some of their friends things had a certain tension. So the UN was the only impartial observer, and as long as we kept that impartiality we were useful. And, therefore, we could be the keeper of the faith if you want, an impartial third. I do believe that this function, being totally new, is developing, and each man has his style. Dag Hammarskjold, whom I didn't know -- I met him briefly as a delegate in 1956 -- enlarged the functions of the Secretariat, of the Secretary-General to an enormous part. But, let's face it, he brought the organization on the verge of breaking up because of it. So, when U Thant came, he was a perfect man to consolidate all the gains -- a man with a profound ethical outlook. I mean, it was extraordinary. People will have to do justice to U Thant who was not a man of great culture; he couldn't speak in abstract terms, but had a clear knowledge of the function of the Secretary-General and what it should be, and he had a clear moral, ethical outlook which helped enormously to consolidate the functions of the Secretary-General. At the same time he did not aspire to any enlargement of the functions of the Secretary-General. He was very austere. So, with two different styles, two different conceptions they both contributed to the moving forward of the organization. And, finally, in my time with Waldheim, we had the diplomat, we had the former Foreign Minister, the Ambassador. He gave a new dimension to the

position of Secretary-General. You will recall, as you were yourself involved, that under U Thant, the Secretary-General did not attend the private consultations of the Security Council. Under Waldheim, not only did Waldheim attend, but then afterwards, when he couldn't, he sent his representative to be present, and finally said, "Please have those consultations at another moment because I cannot be present." I mean, the difference is enormous. So we are going always forward because of this impartial third as long as it keeps that impartiality and has earned respect for such. So each man has his style, but with his style is advancing in the role.

JS I know you have to go now. Just for the record, let me ask one further question, and that is, and this is for the future, Brian Urquhart has just completed a study you may be familiar with on leadership in the United Nations, and, has proposed, that, in the future, the tenure of Secretaries-General should be limited to one term of seven years, and that there should be a search committee established by the Security Council or the General Assembly to go around the world, so to speak, to find the man or woman who is best qualified for the task. On the basis of your experience in the United Nations, both in the Secretariat, but also as a Delegate, what do you think of that approach?

AG Well, I always have a certain uneasiness on programmatic solutions. Is it good to have one or two terms? Was it bad

for the United States, the third term of Franklin Roosevelt? I don't know. Yes, it could be that just one term would be a good idea, especially for five years. On the second point, though I think we are two billion people on earth with all the variety of culture that represents. I think you can take lifetimes and that when we finally arrive to solutions the candidates will have already died. So, with all due respect for my friend and former colleague, I have a certain doubt whether this is practical. Because there are a series of qualities which are difficult to define. Should a man have an academic background? U Thant was a school teacher. And so you could go on with many things. It is very difficult if you would like because then we would give to a computer to analyze the basic parameters. And then the [search] commission! Who would install this, I mean, who will be the members of that commission? Shall we go with the principles of adequate geographical distribution? Should we have different cultures? What experiences? I think the idea theoretically is very plausible, but I am afraid I could not concur in the practical . . .

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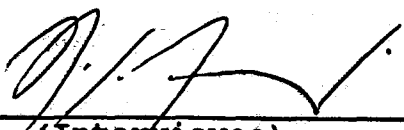
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UNITED NATIONS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
ORAL HISTORY AGREEMENT

I, Roberto E. Guver (Interviewee) hereby agree to participate in the United Nations Oral History Project, sponsored by the Yale University Institution for Social and Policy Studies, and consent to the recording by magnetic audio tape of (an) interview(s) with James J. Sutterlin (Interviewer) on November 1, 1990 (Date) at Buenos Aires (City), Argentina (State).

It is my understanding that a typed transcript will be made of such tape(s) and returned to me for any necessary corrections. I hereby agree that if for any reason I have not returned the transcript with my corrections to the Institution for Social and Policy Studies within three months of the time it was sent to me, the Project Staff may edit the transcript and make it available for research and other use as provided here below.

In the understanding that the tape(s) and transcript(s) will be preserved at the United Nations and made available for historical, scholarly and (as deemed appropriate by the United Nations) public information purposes, and that copies will be placed on deposit at Yale University for research and study, I hereby grant, assign, and transfer legal titles and all literary rights in the tape(s) and transcript(s) to the United Nations. However, it is agreed that neither the United Nations nor Yale University will publish or authorize publication of the transcript(s) or any part thereof during my lifetime without my written permission.

  
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(Interviewee)

May 23, 1991  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Interviewer)

May 23 1991  
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(Date)

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(For the Institution of Social and Policy Studies)

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