

Peking story (American prisoners in China) - correspondence, letters and ca...

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Peking story

23 December 1954

Transcript of Sec. Gen's Press conference at the
Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Stockholm, 18 Dec.

TRANSCRIPT OF SECRETARY-GENERAL'S PRESS CONFERENCE AT THE SWEDISH
MINISTRY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, STOCKHOLM, 18 DECEMBER 1954

Hammaraskjold: Well, seeing so many non-Swedish friends and faces here I think you'll excuse me if I tell you in English how very pleased I am to be here again and to see you all again in this room, which I've got to like very much. I hope you like it as well. I guess that it might be a practical arrangement if I make this press conference mainly in English but with Swedish translations, because, after all, I guess that the situation, in which we are at present is one where the interest outside the country is at least as keen as it is here at home in Stockholm. So if you don't mind, I'll reply in English and I'll say a few things perhaps as an introduction too in English but I'll translate it into Swedish.

This isn't of course a press conference in the usual sense of the word, but now when I happen to come back for entirely different reasons - the Swedish Academy - and knowing that quite a few of you have expressed interest to see me, we felt, my friends in the Foreign Office and I myself, that the best arrangement would be to meet as a group, because frankly I haven't got too much time, and then of course it's much better to give that time to you as a group.

What you have in mind, of course, is not what happens to be this or that kind of private entertainment to which I devote my time here, but the major operations in the U. N. and in relation to the U. N. - first of all, of course, the question of the fliers in China. I don't think I have to refresh in any way your memories concerning the main details of that development. The question was raised in the United Nations by the Americans and by the United Nations Command - those countries, which represent United Nations Command - as a case where the United Nations had to feel a direct concern about one part of the aftermath of the war in Korea. And last week, on Friday, the General Assembly passed a resolution, where they, among other things, requested the Secretary General to seek the release of these United Nations command personnel and others still retained. They also asked him to make continuous and unremitting efforts to get a liberation.

(more)

Note No. 997
23 December 1954

On the basis of that request, I addressed a cable at once to the Chinese Premier and Foreign Secretary Chou En-lai. I said I had felt that this was an occasion where it would be useful for me to take up personally with him the question. As you know, the cable -- this proposal of mine, for a talk together -- was accepted by Mr. Chou En-lai, yesterday, and in response to his reply I said that I was looking forward to the opportunity of meeting him in Peking. As to the time-table it has been said that some date soon after Christmas, after the 26th, might be convenient. He has left the question of the date to me, and I pointed out that that had to be considered in the light of certain practical arrangements which are necessary. I also mentioned that as to these various practical arrangements -- and mind you, ladies and gentlemen, they are quite a few -- it might be good if I could find an opportunity to discuss part of those arrangements while I was here in Stockholm, where I have the special possibility provided by an embassy. Well, in short that is the background story, which I certainly needn't in any way recapitulate, but which I felt all the same might be a good idea to bring to your attention again.

Before giving you the floor, ladies and gentlemen, I feel that there are a few additional comments I would like to make. First of all, I think that you do realize that the United Nations in this case is engaged, like the other party, in a negotiation of considerable importance -- of importance also in terms of the individual and private interests of the people concerned. Under such circumstances the obligation to observe all possible discretion, tact, and prudence, is a matter of course. It is a rule everywhere in political and diplomatic negotiations, but I think that it is imperative in a case like this one, out of sheer respect for the private interests and direct interests involved. For that reason, I beg you to excuse me if I find it necessary to keep down to bare facts and to avoid all comments of a general nature or anything that might in any way complicate the situation, and I hope that you respect my restraint in that respect.

There may be also another thing that lies close to you. It is certainly a temptation for you to, let me say, ask what I believe

(more)

Note No. 997
23 December 1954

about this and that and what I think about the possibility of success and all that sort of thing. Well, you know very well that is a kind of question which is just futile, it is nothing that can be discussed or should be discussed. But I might perhaps quote myself, quoting a Danish author on United Nations Day this fall, when I referred to him as saying that "to succeed is to realize what is possible." This may sound like a platitude, but in fact it's not a platitude. I think that all I would like to say if you were to ask that kind of question, and I would like to say it in advance, is that "to succeed is to realize what is possible." What is possible neither you know nor I know, and that's the full reply.

(Here the Secretary-General repeated his opening remarks in Swedish.)

Well, after those introductory remarks, I will give you, ladies and gentlemen, the floor.

Fleischer:

You said there are considerable practical arrangements to be made. Will you say something about what those arrangements are?

Hammarskjold:

Well, obviously travel arrangements, "shots," who are to go with me and so on and so forth, and those matters are partly two-sided, as you know. (Here the Secretary-General repeated his remarks in Swedish.) I may add that it's considerably easier to arrange these things not by cables but by a little more direct way, if I get a chance for it.

Tunberger:

Has a meeting been arranged between you and the Chinese ambassador in Stockholm?

Hammarskjold:

Well, I would like to reply in this way, and that has to do with my general observation concerning restraint and so on and so forth in this case. I hope you'll excuse me if I do not go into anything that will happen and will be satisfied if I tell you what has happened, and I will not speculate in any way on what may happen. So if you are satisfied to get to know -- get news when there is news -- I am perfectly happy on my side. I'm not in a position to tell you what may or will be done or happen.

(more)

Note No. 997
23 December 1954

Horney: Mr. Hammarskjold, have you got any news after your arrival in Stockholm?

Hammarskjold: No, no no, not at all.

Mrs. Link: Mr. Hammarskjold, have you found a Swedish-Chinese interpreter yet?

Hammarskjold: There are certainly very many interpreters I could choose between - I haven't even gone into the matter, but it's just one of those practical arrangements Mr. Fleischer just talked about.

Ullman: Have you any real suggestion how to ease the tension in the Far East?

Hammarskjold: Everybody's guess.

Ullman: You don't carry any suggestion with you to China?

Hammarskjold: I don't think anybody has suggestions, which he can carry with him. We're living in a fluid world, history is fluid, and to have preconceived ideas in any direction I think is just to sacrifice that flexibility which is a matter of course in diplomacy generally. So my reply to your question would be, for that very platitudinous reason, a flat no.

Kurt Andersson: Have you definitely decided to go back to New York before going to Peking?

Hammarskjold: I go back Tuesday afternoon to New York, at all events, in all circumstances.

G. Axelsson: Have you received advance assurance that General Piao will see you while you are here?

Hammarskjold: Well, that's a question about what will happen.

G. Axelsson: What about your time-table here apart from the Swedish Academy ceremony?

Hammarskjold: It's so full that you can't believe it.

G. Axelsson: Tell us something about it, please.

Hammarskjold: Well, I'll try and go and see my brother in Nykoping, if that interests you. I'll have to make a recording of part of the Academy speech for the Swedish broadcast and so on and so forth and go to the UNESCO exhibition in the Royal Library, and -- well, I can go on if you like.

(more)

Kurt Andersson:

Have you had any kind of contact with the Chinese Embassy since you left New York?

Hammaraskjold:

Personally, no - I haven't.

Sjogren:

When did you have time to write that speech for the Academy?

Hammaraskjold:

Oh, that's a rather intimate question. Well, after all the Assembly is not always in session. It was written before the Assembly met. In the Assembly time I would never have the time for it.

Svensson, AP:

As I understand it, the resolution adopted in the United Nations directs you to negotiate the release of all United Nations' personnel held in China?

Hammaraskjold:

Yes. They mentioned in the first place the eleven.

Svensson, AP:

Would you have any estimates of the total number?

Hammaraskjold:

There are estimates, but I would not quote them now and here, because there is always a certain margin of uncertainty in such things and I wouldn't like to quote anything which is not, so to say, hard and fast... No, I will not give you any estimates.

Fleischer:

Discussing the past, when you sent your first message to Chou En-lai, did you do that on your own initiative or after consultations with several of the other?

Hammaraskjold:

Well, that is a question which goes a little bit beyond what I really would like to take up here, because I do not think that we should to into the operations of the U.N. in a situation like the present one, so I just won't reply to that. On the other hand, as you know, the responsibility can never be anybody else's responsibility than the Secretary-General's, because the authorization is given to the Secretary-General, with no strings as to procedure either in the direction of consultation or anything else. So whatever may have been or may be the internal procedure at the U.N., what is really done is my personal responsibility.

G. Axelsson:

When you were in the air, Mr. Hammaraskjold, did you receive any wireless messages, following your plans or -

Hammaraskjold:

None at all, I only had the usual splendid food.

G. Axelsson:

No indication of progress in other words?

Hammaraskjold:

Or regress? - No - neither.

(more)

G. Axelsson: Of progress, I said.

Hammaraskjold: No, I had no message at all.

G. Axelsson: Just the progress of the plane.

Kurt Andersson: Do you think you will be able to give a new press conference before you're leaving Stockholm?

Hammaraskjold: I wouldn't think so. As I said at the very beginning, this one was just called for because it was obvious that so many of you wanted to get in touch somehow, and then I felt it was most practical to have it in this way, although I knew only too well that you on a Saturday night might run into a situation you didn't like too much, and I might run into an embarrassing situation, as I just haven't any news I could give you, as all the news which is news with a capital N has been published.

Kurt Andersson: Don't you think there will be any facts or news to tell us before you're leaving?

Hammaraskjold: I've told you before that if there is anything to be said concerning what has happened you'll get it, but I don't think that will call for a press conference. But mind you, no misunderstanding, I say if.

Ullman: Did the prosecution of the eleven airmen come as a complete surprise for the U.N., or did you know what was going on in China?

Hammaraskjold: Well, that takes us very far into the back history concerning these eleven, and I don't think that I would want to go into that.

Goodrich: In view of the fact that the Chinese Government need not grant diplomatic immunity to the officials of the United Nations, may not this trip involve some personal risk?

Hammaraskjold: I think now you are on the over-cautious and suspicious side.

(unidentified question): Do you think that it will be more easy to reach a decision with the Chinese if the...

Hammaraskjold: No comments.

G. Axelsson: Have you any indication of quid pro quo in this case?

(more)

Hammaraskjold: None at all. You know there is so much speculation going on in all sorts of directions, as you see from the press, and I just find it worthless and useless and futile to comment on it.

Tunberger: Could you clarify the position as regards the 35 Chinese students in the United States. I mean - could you, so to speak, use them as an argument in China?

Hammaraskjold: No, I won't go into that here. I mean, when you start on a line which really is a kind of speculation, I don't think that we should pursue it... Well, I'm afraid the photographers have got more than you out of this evening, but I'm sure you understand.

Ullman: Do you think that your forthcoming visit to China will be a one-time "shot," or that it may lead to a more permanent contact between the U.N. and Red China?

Hammaraskjold: Again futile to guess. We don't know anything about the future and I would hate to guess.

Harris: You said, Sir, you had to pick someone who might go with you.... Have you any plans for ...

Hammaraskjold: Of course I have, but it would be premature to talk about them.

Horney: Thank you, Mr. Hammaraskjold.

Hammaraskjold: Thank you. Well, I can only repeat that it's a pleasure to see you again. Even if I feel a little bit a bad boy today, that's the situation and not my unwillingness. Thank you.

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