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WORLD CHRONICLE

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DURATION: 28' 00"

TRANSCRIPT AS BROADCAST

PROGRAMME: "WORLD CHRONICLE"

GUEST: Tarzi Vittachi
Deputy Executive Director
United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

JOURNALISTS: Claude Robinson, Inter Press Service
Moses Schoenfeld, Fairchild Broadcast News
Louis Foy, France Soir

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

SYNOPSIS

Eminent Asian Journalist Surveys Global Scene

Has decolonization been a disappointment? What future faces the world's five billionth citizen, due to be born this year? These are among the topics addressed by Tarzi Vittachi, a senior UNICEF official, Newsweek columnist and author, in a wide-ranging discussion of issues he has been involved in over the past 40 years. Among points made by the Sri Lankan writer: the failure to involve ordinary people in development planning; the necessity for self-destruct needles to reduce the spread of AIDS in poor countries.

"WORLD CHRONICLE" is produced by UN Radio and Visual Services, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, N.Y. 10017, USA.

Executive Producer: Martin Bunnell
Producer: Steve Whitehouse
Production Secretary: Diane Barkley

Programme No. 277
87-44740

Recorded on 5 June 1987

VOICE From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is World Chronicle, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's World Chronicle.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns and this is World Chronicle.

Only 45 years ago, what's now loosely called the Third World, was largely a collection of colonies. Their concerns were beginning to receive some attention, although few could have foreseen that issues such as population, or developing country debt would become front page news. Indeed, it would have been quite a prophet who could have predicted the extent and consequences of the phenomenon of decolonization.

Our guest, Tarzi Vittachi, has been witness to many of these post-war developments. Born in Sri Lanka, then called Ceylon, he's had a distinguished career in journalism in Asia and London - today he has a column in Newsweek International magazine. He has published a number of books. He was a senior official in the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, and for the past seven years has been a Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Mr. Vittachi will be interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Claude Robinson of Inter Press Service; Moses Schoenfeld of Fairchild Broadcast News; and Louis Roy of France Soir.

Tarzi, welcome to World Chronicle.

LITTLEJOHNS: Tarzi, you have a very interesting background - in fact your CV is one of the most interesting I've read in a quite some time - and I think one might say that you've got a foot in each camp. You've spent a lot of your career in the industrialized West and much of the remainder of it in Third World countries, so you're in a position to have a pretty good

perspective, a neutral perspective perhaps, of the Third World situation. I think it could be said that there's a certain amount of impatience in the West with the way that Third World countries have, so it's thought, failed to get their act together. I wonder what your impressions are and what the failures and successes in the Third World may be, from your perception?

VITTACHI: The history of the last 45 years that you speak about Michael, is largely a history of trying to come out from under the old imperial pattern which clearly marked the whole world. In fact, the whole UN system when it began, and it's clearly indicated in its own Charter, indicated that the old imperial system of the world carved into various colours - you might remember in your old atlases - was going to continue. The war was only a rude interruption of that process which had come to last forever in many people's minds. So, the history of what we now call the Third World - I don't like to use that word because it's a distance-making word - is very much of how do we get our act together as you say, but the point is how do you get national acts together because most of our private institutions, even our national institutions had been submerged, pushed under, relegated for over 450 years. So how do you get our national institutions, our national enterprises, people's talents, organized in various institutional ways? How do you get that together has been a very interesting part of that process.

LITTLEJOHNS: So how do you get it together?

VITTACHI: Well, I think that many many ways have been suggested. For instance some countries went the socialist route, some countries went the private enterprise route, got involved in the ideological conflict across the globe and they are coming out of it now, still as nationalists. That's the most important thing, that national sovereignty is alive and well. I think that it's only a stage of our evolution and we will move towards one world. But within countries how people are trying to get the act together, is trying to realize that our problems are now beyond ideology, that we have to take a bit of this and a bit of that, that life is never about either or but about and, and. So even my own country, Sri Lanka for instance, which used to have

a very heavy socialist framework in its political and economic operations, when the present government came in about ten years ago they dismantled that whole socialist apparatus. But what is happening now is that more and more of the free enterprise system that was re-established there ten years, we find that it is necessary for the government to act as umpire to prevent the excrescences of free enterprise, how people operate it - in other words greed.

LITTLEJOHNS: The unacceptable face of capitalism?

VITTACHI: Absolutely. We try to find a human face through which people's lives can be expressed better.

ROBINSON: Tarzi, I want to talk a little bit about journalism. You've done a lot of things: you've edited several newspapers; you've been a columnist; you've founded press institutes in India, Philippines, South Korea; and so on and the list goes on and on - very impressive achievements. But one of the things you've done, I think, is to coin the term and been involved in the training of something called "development journalism". First of all, why do you think that was necessary and what is it?

VITTACHI: The word development journalism was not something that I coined actually, but it was coined by Asian journalists who came for training who said that they would like not to be called economics reporters but development journalists because for them, economics reporting was largely a matter of development reporting. Now, unfortunately, this phrase was got hold of by various governments who limited the meaning of that phrase to reporting the good things that happen in that country and ignore the bad things. The whole point about development journalism was that it was a critical assessment, not a hostile assessment, but a critical assessment about what was going on in their own countries so that people, the readers and viewers and radio listeners, the people would be involved in their own development. That was the whole point about development journalism.

ROBINSON: You've said that unfortunately it's been gotten hold of by governments who use it for their own advantage and perhaps the disadvantage of their societies and people. Is the term in its original form and what it meant still of any use today, or is that passé?

VITTACHI: Oh yes, I think it will prevail because it describes very well what it is about. No journalist worth his salt, in my opinion, will allow himself to be used as a propaganda tool. I think we always, whatever our political views are, we have to remain critically appreciative of the agenda.

ROBINSON: Is that possible though within the context of societies, developing countries societies I'm talking about, where either the press is owned by a small oligarchy, usually a very minor ruling elite, or it's owned by the government and therefore reflecting either those points of view rather than reflecting any broad democratic point of view?

VITTACHI: Let me say that when you say in the developing countries the press is ruled by a small oligarchy it is so in the Western world, very much. I mean just consider how many newspapers, blocks of newspapers and the communications channels are owned by very few people. Governments own the press in some countries. In my own country, during Mrs. Bandaranaike's time, they nationalised the press. Ninety percent of the press was nationalised. Now, what is interesting is that when I go back home younger journalists ask me, "How shall we fight the battle for press freedom like you used to in your time?" I say, "Look nobody's going to give you press freedom. Nobody gives you any freedoms. You have to earn it, you have to work at it and pay the price".

LITTLEJOHNS: But the newspapers in Sri Lanka are independent now, are they not?

VITTACHI: No they're not. Most of them are still government-owned newspapers.

SCHOENFELD: You are known around here to be a kind of philosopher as well as a journalist and maybe I could put this question in that framework. The media, you said, has to be free and to what extent should this freedom be curbed? I'm alluding particularly to recent examples where the media has pried into the private lives of public figures and it's reached a point where no public figure seems to be immune from close examination, with binoculars if necessary, to make sure that he's not misbehaving or doing anything off colour. How far do you think the media should go in attempting to present figures in public life?

VITTACHI: It's perfectly true that once you put yourself out on the public agenda as a presidential candidate, or something like that, you must expect to be probed because you are valued not only as an official or a potential official but also as a human being, and a human being has a public life and a private life. But I would suggest very much that we re-examine how far you should go about people's really private affairs. I think that persons' peccadilloes, their private habits, are their own business. Nobody who asks those questions from these candidates, for instance in recent times, if I was one of those candidates I would have asked back in return.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean the famous question, "Have you committed adultery" which was addressed to Gary Hart?

VITTACHI: I would have asked have you or haven't you, and then if the answer was "Have you yourself?" I'd say, "Let's talk about this in the stag room".

LITTLEJOHNS: But the reporter who asked the question, Tarzi, is not a public figure running for President of the United States.

VITTACHI: That's true but it's nobody's business, I think, how I spend my private time in my bedroom.

SCHOENFELD: But, Mr. Tarzi, don't you think the standards of behaviour have changed sufficiently, and the public seems to accept the changes

but expects the leaders not to go along with those new changes, flexibility if you will?

VITTACHI: I think that we really must, as journalists, should stop being hypocritical about ourselves. That's the first thing. In other words our own private standards. Why should we expect anybody else to differ from our own private standards? I'll be constantly aware of my own set of morality and my own value scales before I try to judge somebody else's.

FOY: Mr. Vittachi, you wrote a profile of the fifth billion human being who is supposed to be born some time this summer and probably in Africa and you also drew his horoscope or her horoscope which does not extend beyond three years. In fact the fifth billionth birth seems to be for you somewhat of a catastrophe?

VITTACHI: Well, catastrophic for that child and for that child's parents. I think what is happening is this. The most important thing to realize, I think, for all of us is that whatever we do, that is to say however successful the so-called family planning programmes are, even if they were one hundred percent successful - which they will never be, nothing can be one hundred percent successful in public effort like - there will be six billion people give or take a couple of hundred million, in the next 12-13 years, adding more than a billion people in the next 12-13 years. Now, if that is inevitable short of catastrophe, nuclear catastrophe for instance, since that seems to be inevitable, surely what we should be doing....

LITTLEJOHNS: What seems to be inevitable, nuclear catastrophe?

VITTACHI: No, I'm sorry if I gave that impression. What I meant was the sixth billionth child will be born. If that is inevitable, in other words one billion more going to be added to this planet, then we must be making preparations now to receive that one billion. How do you deal with the one billion? I think now is the time, it's already late, but perhaps not too late to plan our economies. I mean we must ask ourselves fundamental

questions because most of these children are being born in countries that can least afford to sustain even their present populations. What can we do with food supplies because there's an enormous amount of food in the world, an excess of food, and the capacity to produce much more although there is famine and starvation in many, many parts of the world. There are probably about 700 million destitute people in the world today and probably 400 million children go to bed hungry every night. Can we afford that? Can we as human beings, with all the technology at our disposal, all the knowledge at our disposal and brilliant people in the world, can we not get our act together to receive these visitors in a more dignified way than we seem to have done in the last so many years?

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is World Chronicle. Our guest is Tarzi Vittachi, Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

FOY: In an interview with Newsweek you wrote, I believe, that "bureaucracy gives the world stability, that motion is dangerous, that bureaucracy keeps things static". Has the UN reached that happy stage of no motion?

VITTACHI: Well, I think some departments of the UN and some departments within departments of the UN, some of us have become laid back bureaucrats because it's much easier to remain static, keeping the status quo even, than to thrust out and to be really an effective change agent in the world. That article that you're referring to really was a satirical piece. It was a send-up of ourselves and I can see this tendency in all of us because it's easier to say no than to say yes. I often think that the whole business of a bureaucrat is to say no, because if you say yes then he has no job.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you think of yourself more as a journalist than as a bureaucrat or vice versa?

VITTACHI: Well, Michael, I often tell my family, my friends that I'm really a journalist masquerading as a bureaucrat. Bureaucracy is something that all of us admit is boring, even the bureaucrats, and nobody has ever yet found an alternative to bureaucracy. Even famous big multinational corporations have a bureaucracy. Even academic institutions have huge bureaucracies, so it seems to be like one of those incredibly necessary evils which people are always trying to find an alternative for.

LITTLEJOHNS: So whether you like it or not you're stuck with it.

ROBINSON: Tarzi, I want to turn a little bit to development. Within the United Nations system over the last thirty years or so, we've had the decade of this and the decade of that and any number that you can think of and yet, I think, most people writing on development believe that it's been pretty much illusive, that the goals have not been met largely. What's wrong? Have the goals been wrong? Have we tried to overreach ourselves and our capacity or what? What's wrong?

VITTACHI: I think there are many answers to that Claude, but I have my own answer which is not a solution to the problem that you have raised but certainly a way to look at a possible improvement in the way we do business in development. I think what we have failed to do, by and large, is to involve what we call the "recipient", in other words, the man and woman in the village, the family in the village, the family in the communities in these countries, in their own development. In other words we have regarded them as recipients - a passive, inarticulate rather stupid, uninformed people - who are just waiting for the boons of development falling in their laps instead of involving them, reaching them, so that they make the demands for development in their own lives. For instance, a woman in a village in Sri Lanka recently when I asked her, "Have you vaccinated this child of yours?" she said to me, "What is that?" and I tried to explain. She said, "Why do you suggest that my child who is well, as you can see, but you are suggesting that I put a disease into my child's veins when my child is well. What is the wisdom of that, pray?" Now I think we'll be silly, absolutely silly, to expect people

to come to accept vaccinations unless they know the meaning of this, unless they know what value it is for themselves and their children. That is what I constantly refer to now as a demand approach. The old supply approach of supplying equipment, technical assistance, money, all kinds of necessities like medicines, and food and so on, that won't work.

ROBINSON: But do you see any real signs of that change because our people are still educated in the same institutions, in the same processes for a top-down approach rather than the bottoms-up that you're talking about?

VITTACHI: But I'm really talking of a communications approach. In UNICEF one of the things we are very proud of having done, having contributed to at any rate, is to bring information and communication right into the middle of our programme. In fact this is the cutting edge of our programmes. When people begin to understand, then they make a demand for these services, then the demand infrastructure can meet the supply infrastructure, and then there is development.

ROBINSON: But you're changing power structures then?

VITTACHI: Well, I don't want to overstate my case. I only say that in spite of the existing power structures one tries to do the change in the power thinking, the modes of thinking.

SCHOENFELD: As the Deputy Executive Director for External Relations of UNICEF you must be concerned with the growing evidence that AIDS has now become practically a plague, and since there's no cure in sight at the present time you've put together a series of obligations that human rights are supposed to extend specifically to the children as one of our chief resources, and you gave us a figure of 5 billion. Now, don't you think that that figure of 5 billion could be considerably reduced if we don't find this cure to AIDS, and what kinds of tests should mothers go through before they give birth to a child whom they have already infected? Is there some thought being given to that aspect?

VITTACHI: I think many many people are very concerned about individual liberties and how far action can go even in a crisis, even in very very critical times. As far as UNICEF is concerned, we are very concerned for instance about how do you protect children who are being vaccinated from infected needles. In the poor countries, you can imagine the complexity of these problems and the delicacy of these problems if you like. You provide disposable needles but a disposable needle is such a fantastic objet d'art in many societies; it's beautifully made, who could throw it away. What we are trying now desperately to find is a self-destruct needle, one time use, self-destruct needle, and that I think is a tremendous answer to our problem.

SCHOENFELD: Isn't there also the issue of literacy? If the individuals who are trying to be helped are illiterate you are unlikely to educate them even in this simple aspect of disposing of a needle?

VITTACHI: Yes. As you know I always say that I have never equated literacy with wisdom. I think that they are two totally different things. My grandmother was declared to be an illiterate because she spoke only in Sinhalese and she read Sanskrit stanzas before she went to bed. She was English illiterate. There are various kinds of illiteracy but I'm talking of wisdom. The wisdom that human beings have for self-protection is beyond literacy.

FOY: Mr. Vittachi, you wrote a pamphlet in favour of a declaration of children's rights. That's one more declaration - we must have about 20 already at the UN. Is this another piece of bureaucracy or what is it going to do for the fifth billionth or the sixth billionth child when he or she is born?

VITTACHI: Let me, if I may, make one correction there. It is not about a declaration. We have had two declarations - the League of Nations has a declaration on children's rights and the United Nations in 1959 had a declaration on children's rights. But what we are talking about now is a

convention on children's rights which has a few more teeth. It's a little more committing than declarations.

LITTLEJOHNS: That would be an international treaty?

VITTACHI: It would be a series of international treaties, that is to say, signatory parties to the convention will be obligated to carrying out those rights to which they agree. But in my opinion, as I state in that pamphlet, it will not happen, the implementation part of this will not happen until our colleagues in the press and the media understand it for themselves as being important for their own countries and that they create a climate of opinion or they help to create a climate of opinion in their country in which the governments will realize and the people with power will realize that the country will be judged by their neighbours according to how well or ill they look after their children.

LITTLEJOHNS: Tarzi, a few years ago you wrote a book, "Brown Sahib" about the brown and what shall I say, non-white, which is a terrible expression but still, people who took over leadership in the Third World or in the countries that were previously colonies, and you have another book coming out "Brown Sahib Revisited". How have the brown sahibs done?

VITTACHI: Well, we've been talking about what they have done in the last forty years in this programme. By and large, I think they have illustrated in their activities and in their modes, my own contention, my first contention, the earliest contention, that what was happening was that we replaced a clear white imperialism with a rather murky, not so clear brown imperialism.

LITTLEJOHNS: That's all the time we have. Thank you very much. Our guest has been Tarzi Vittachi, Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNCIEF). He was interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Claude Robinson of Inter Press Service; Moses Schoenfeld of Fairchild Broadcast News; and Louis Foy of France Soir.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us again for the next edition of World Chronicle.

Transcripts of these interviews may be obtained without cost by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: WORLD CHRONICLE, United Nations, Room S-837, New York, New York 10017 USA.

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