

"Quiet diplomacy may be very effective, but lousy business for the press. You are easily led, or misled, by people who will claim to know the undercurrents of various wonderful issues. There are times when you would rather have it from the horse's mouth! The most difficult thing to cover nowadays is a major Security Council debate where some difficult negotiations are taking place behind closed doors. The press will be gathered at the exit of that chamber, and they are waiting desperately for some clue as to what has been happening in that room. Well, every speaker who comes out is going to be a member of a certain delegation, every speaker will be projecting their wishful sentiment, in a way. Some less experienced UN press people have been burned when, let us say, they are on deadline and they are waiting for a resolution to come up for a vote ... and the representative of country X comes out and says, 'Yes, we expect a vote within the hour'; the person goes on the air and says there will be a vote within the hour. Not necessarily so. The trick here is to get as many points of view to a conflict as possible. It is much more complicated than most stories.

"The 40th anniversary raised interest in the United Nations, but Stephen Lewis has done so even more. The average ambassador does not generate that kind of interest but Stephen Lewis, because of his personality, his eloquence and his approach to an issue, will grab your attention. People may not agree with him, but they listen. A few years ago we had Ivor Richard of the United Kingdom, [an] excellent speaker; we had [Senator] Daniel Moynihan of the United States at the same time; we had Salim Salim of Tanzania—and we had fantastic exchanges, there were excellent press conferences. It is a theatre—some would say a theatre of the absurd—; it depends what your beliefs are. But the press looks for a good show, and, especially if you work for radio and television, you need to have a good clip.

"Being at the United Nations for many years, as I have been, forces you to realize—not necessarily to accept—that there are many different points of view on most issues; and that those various points of view have their merit if viewed from the speaker. I'm curious by nature, and like to know why even the most outrageous thing is said. When Iran speaks, as it does very frequently now, about Israel, which it refuses to name by name, it's flabbergasting but it is a reality. When people say that the UN is a joke, and hysterical things are being said left and right, and it is said that the UN means nothing, it has no relevance to the outside world—I disagree with that. I think we would all be smart to listen, get some signals...."

One consequence of the United Nations being poorly covered—and poorly regarded as a news source—by news organizations is that important stories that first break at the United Nations are sometimes ignored for months. Ginette Ast gives an example:

"The famine in Africa didn't suddenly pop up because the BBC went to take pictures there. It had been an issue that had been discussed here for some time. The Secretary-General had issued appeals, but it seemed that it just wouldn't register. One colleague a few years ago, who worked around the major wire services, used to say he can sell anything to his editors, but he better not use the UN dateline. He was exaggerating the point; but a good