

## PBS television network

April 16, 2003

### Interview

by [Ronald K. Noble](#),  
Secretary General of INTERPOL

INTERPOL Secretary General Ronald K. Noble was interviewed by the PBS television network in the United States in connection with the four-part documentary series '*Avoiding Armageddon*', which dealt with the threat posed by terrorists who may have access to weapons of mass destruction.

The interview was broadcast after Part 3 of the series, on April 16, 2003. The series, co-produced by PBS and Ted Turner Documentaries, will be re-broadcast on PBS and shown on other world television networks later this year.

Some excerpts from the interview follow:

#### **PBS**

Terrorism is the ugly, desperate side of human nature as we've seen, but we've confronted that side repeatedly throughout history so, we ask, what must be done now to address this new deadly challenge? Where does it come from, and where is it taking us? Joining us now is Ronald Noble. He's Secretary General of INTERPOL, which may make him the world's top cop...We're glad that you could make it by to have this discussion with us.

#### **RN**

Thank you

#### **PBS**

We've seen in this documentary, and heard a lot about this new terror, this stateless global terrorism that would inflict such damage, often recruiting from the disenfranchised and the hopeless. From your vantage point, can this be stopped?

#### **RN**

It can be stopped and it has been stopped. There are examples, around the world, where the law enforcement and intelligence community have worked together to thwart terrorist acts. The one I point to as the best example is what happened in December 2001 in Singapore, where a Singaporean citizen called up and told their intelligence services that there were these people acting suspiciously. In fact, what was going on was a group related to al Qaeda was filming US soldiers, filming the US embassy and the Israeli embassy, taking videos, of boats coming in and out of Singapore, all with an idea of engaging in a huge terrorist act against the US, Israel and the UK, and they were able to arrest those people, debrief them and stop that. There are other examples: in the UK with ricin [deadly poison], in France and even in the US. The problem is, with the job that we do, is that you've got to be right one hundred percent of the time, or, if you're wrong, you hope you're not wrong when the next September 11 happens.

#### **PBS**

And you've got to stay ahead of them, because there's always that next group learning from the practices of the preceding terrorist group.

**RN**

That's right... The analogy I use sometimes: it's like chasing a rat down a hallway with a lot of rat holes. You've not only got to catch the rat, but you've got to block all the rat holes as well. And from our perspective, what we try to do at INTERPOL, we say, 'What are the common tools that terrorists use?' For example, fraudulent passports, fraudulent travel documents, secret compartments, organized crime networks, that move and smuggle people from one area to another area. So we are having success in it, but at the back of our minds, and from the intelligence we are reading and seeing, we know that the sleeper cells still exist and that they want to do serious damage and harm.

**PBS**

Sleeper cells still exist. Where? How many? How serious?

**RN**

You can't expect me to tell you where exactly and how many, but I can tell you that they exist in the US, they exist in Europe and they exist around the world. And when I say sleeper cells, I mean that we are still investigating al Qaeda, and people connected with al Qaeda, we have not gotten all those people connected with al Qaeda, first point. The second point is there are a number of terrorist groups like Jemaah Islamiyah in Singapore, or GIA in Algeria. Groups that want to engage in terrorist acts and associate themselves with al Qaeda in order to add more terror and more effect. So I don't want to make people feel more fear than they should. But they should recognize that the threat exists, it's real and law enforcement on a national and global basis are trying to work to reduce this threat.

**PBS**

...You say that sleeper cells still exist, and presumably as a result they are still a threat, and that's despite some of the moves that have been made against the leadership of al Qaeda?

**RN**

What I was telling you is that al Qaeda's operational ability has been damaged greatly. There are significant arrests that exist. But the reason that alerts still exist in the US, and alerts exist throughout the world, is because we recognize that al Qaeda still exists as a realistic threat. And for me, it's always a question of the difference between risk and threat. I see the risk exists because we know there are still members of al Qaeda around the world. We know that they have the intention to use weapons of mass destruction or chemical weapons, or biological weapons, based on intelligence that we have gathered. And therefore I put the two together and I say that there is a real threat, but what we don't know is when it will strike and where it will strike.

**PBS**

...On the issue of terrorists and weapons of mass destruction; how near and how serious is that threat?

**RN**

I don't have the answer -- it's an important thing for me to be able to say when I don't know something. I don't have the answer. I simply know that terrorist groups, al Qaeda in particular, have been investigating and exploring the possibility of using biological agents. So you know that you've got a group that's willing to engage in this kind of activity, you know that these pathogens exist. And when the risk becomes a threat? I don't know.

**PBS**

You are a global law enforcement organization. You are with police forces, law enforcement, all over the world. Some of this terrorism is global in nature. What's the hardest part about a global law enforcement pursuing a global adversary?

**RN**

The hardest part is to be trusted by one of your member countries who knows that another member country, or believes that another member country, is engaged in wrongdoing. The example I will use is this. It's fair to say that the relationship between the US and Libya is not strong. Libya is a member of INTERPOL, so people will say, from the intelligence community or law enforcement agencies, 'We can't

work with INTERPOL because Libya's a member of INTERPOL.' And if the analysis stops right there, the US and other countries are hurt. Why? Because the first country in the world to seek the arrest of Osama bin Laden was Libya, in 1988. So what I say to law enforcement around the world is: 'Trust us with the names of people you are looking for. You don't need to give us all information.' But when we put Osama bin Laden into our database, and...Osama bin Laden goes into an airport, and the passport is scanned, the U.S. then has the information and can decide: 'We contact Libya, or we don't'.

**PBS**

Well, the same Libya was connected to the Lockerbie bombing, so some of that reticence, that reluctance to trust or to work with Libyan law enforcement, should be understood.

**RN**

... From INTERPOL's perspective, we say, 'You don't have to trust everyone. You don't have to trust all member countries.' We know the same problem with trust exists, exists on a domestic basis, worldwide. What we say is 'Do you want to be the law enforcement agency that was investigating a terrorist, that told no-one about it, so this terrorist was able to go around the world feeding information or plotting terrorist acts, only to find out that he or she engaged in another September 11?' So I say, there is a way to share information without disclosing the sensitive nature of the information.

**PBS**

...International law enforcement requires international co-operation. What's needed most?

**RN**

From my perspective, what's needed most, is you've got to have the infrastructure, you've got to have the infrastructure so that if I get information about a terrorist, and I want to send it worldwide, I know that I'm connected to at least one police office in the world and that I can get information to that office in a real-time basis -- first thing. Secondly, you need the infrastructure from a political-will perspective, to say that 'Yes, we will let you know that we are looking at a terrorist.' That is, when I was a prosecutor, it was not uncommon for prosecutors to investigate someone and to get an arrest warrant and keep it under seal. And if that person happened to be stopped somewhere, the person would be arrested. But meanwhile, if he travelled outside of your country he would never be stopped. And so INTERPOL believes, you've got to share information about people for whom you have reason to believe they're engaged in terrorist activities. One last point is in the area of biological weapons, pathogens and so forth, the world needs to get its act together and decide it's a priority and come up with a convention setting standards for the use of these pathogens for legitimate research, their storage, background checks of people using them, and their transportation. Because the thought that someone could be corrupted, and give these pathogens to terrorists, is a real concern...