



University of London

INSTITUTE OF COMMONWEALTH STUDIES

VOICE FILE NAME: COHP Sir Shridath Ramphal (Part One)

Key:

SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

SR: Sir Shridath Ramphal (Respondent)

PART ONE:

Location: Athenaeum Club, London

Date: 23rd November 2013

SO: This is Dr Sue Onslow talking to Sir Shridath Ramphal, Secretary General of the Commonwealth between 1975 and 1990. Sir, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to me. I wondered if you could begin, please, by describing how you came to be selected and elected as Secretary General.

SR: It really is a strange story, because I did not come to it through ambition. I had become very active as Foreign Minister of Guyana on the international scene – and, indeed, on the Commonwealth scene – because, in 1971, four years before I became Secretary General, I was involved in the Singapore [Commonwealth Heads of Government] conference. This was a bit of a debacle because of Ted Heath and the Simonstown Agreement and arms sales to South Africa. It was there, of course, [that] we produced the Singapore Declaration, which was the first organic document of the Commonwealth. In Singapore, the people who worked on that document were Mark Chona of Zambia, Ivan Head of Canada and myself. We drafted it and others titivated with it, but it meant that I had a good deal of prominence at the Commonwealth level there. Within a year, I was chairing the meeting of Non-Aligned Foreign Ministers in Guyana. It was quite a sensational meeting because it was the first time the Non-Aligned Movement had met at any political level in the Western hemisphere – outside New York, at the UN – and it was a big coup. It was a difficult time in non-alignment. There were deep problems dividing the movement over Sihanouk and Cambodia, and, as well, over the admission to full membership of the Non-Aligned Movement of the 'Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam' – the PRG. As you can imagine, those divisions were along Cold War lines, and the threat was

that the movement would break up. So, the Foreign Ministers' meeting in Georgetown became absolutely pivotal. I, in the Chair, had the job of steering it out of these murky waters. Well, what can I tell you? It was a success. The Chair was hailed as having been crucial in this.

SO: How did you manage that?

SR: [*Laughter*] With a good deal of footwork and the help of a lot of people, and getting the trust of people. I had, for example, to get the trust of the Algerians and of [Abdelaziz] Bouteflika, in particular. Bouteflika is a fighter. So, when I pleaded with him to follow my strategy of not bringing it to the table, he said, "You're asking me to demobilise? [*Laughter*] My forces are ready!" And I said, "Yes, I am. You have to trust me." Eventually we did by getting Prime Minister Burnham to be in touch with the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. This was over an issue of the venue of the next meeting, which Mrs Bandaranaike [of Sri Lanka] wanted as a memorial to her assassinated husband, and which Boumediene [of Algeria] wanted as a monument to his leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement. So, we had deep personal problems, but then the movement divided along Cold War alliances.

SO: So, there wasn't a Commonwealth group within the NAM?

SR: No, there wasn't. It had nothing to do with the Commonwealth. What it meant in terms of me and the Commonwealth was that two years later, in 1974, when the issue of a successor to the Secretary General of the Commonwealth arose, my name came to the surface almost automatically – because of these antecedent activities.

SO: You'd won your spurs?

SR: [*Laughter*] I'd won them, but without meaning to. The way it all emerged was that we had a High Commissioner in London called Sir John Carter, and he was an urbane, kindly man – my elder. The High Commissioners began talking among themselves – as they kept tending to do – about the succession. Arnold [Smith] hadn't indicated that he was going for a third term or that he wasn't. I think he was himself thinking about it. But the High Commissioners began to think about this. What happened next was that I got a telephone call from John Carter – I was in Georgetown – saying, "Look, this is what's been happening. The High Commissioners have been talking, your name has popped up, and I am at a loss. I don't know what to say: you've never talked to me about this." He was clearly quite expectant. I was dumbstruck! I said, "Look, I need time; I need to think." He said, "But I have to do something. They're pressing me to find out if you would be willing." And I said, "Well, I can't tell you that I'm willing, but take the temperature on the basis that I might be, without any commitment that I am." He called me back in two days – there are some conversations you remember very vividly – [and] he said, "Minister, you asked me to take the temperature. I've done so. It's a forest fire!"

SO: What a wonderful analogy!

SR: [*Laughter*] And so it just went from that. The next thing was [that] the British Press were saying, "It's a shoe-in for Sonny Ramphal." Arnold went and

talked in Ottawa and came back – he wasn't one hundred percent well – and he said, "I'm not standing."

SO: Do you think the Canadians were somewhat nonplussed that, after all, 'their' man was not going to go for that third term?

SR: I don't think, at that stage, they any longer regarded him as 'their' man. Remember I told you about Ivan Head and Singapore? They felt Canada had done ten years. It was time for a developing country, and they knew Sonny Ramphal by then.

SO: What of India's role? I'm thinking of its leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement, and wonder whether this was of critical importance.

SR: It was important to me because, as the biggest country in the Commonwealth...were they going to show an interest? In any case, I was sufficiently close to Indira Gandhi in the Non-Aligned Movement [and so could] not do this without talking to her. I talked to her. She was a little uncertain – not about my credentials but about the loss to Non-Alignment. Her line was, "Look, you're doing so well for us as Foreign Minister of Guyana on the world stage. Do you think it's the best thing for you to go [to] this rather old-fashioned institution?"

SO: So, she felt it would be very much a demotion for you – that you would be going to a backwater?

SR: Not so much a demotion for me, but a loss for her – a loss to things that she regarded as more important than the Commonwealth. I said, "Well, you know, I've thought about that but the Commonwealth, after all, is now 80% developing countries. It is what Nehru hoped it would be." I pulled a little at those heart strings [Jawaharlal Nehru was Indira Gandhi's father]. She thought about it and she said, "You know, you may have a point. But if you go there, you've got to shake it up." And those were words that you don't forget.

SO: So, where did you have this discussion?

SR: In Georgetown, prior to the Kingston meeting. "You've got to shake it up."

SO: Did you ask for advice from any other key leaders?

SR: Not really. The Guyanese Prime Minister, Forbes Burnham, then got behind my candidature, as he had to. I couldn't go forward without that. He wrote to all the leaders, but his strengths were with the African leaders: he brought them on board. And they knew me, too, from Non-Alignment. So, I didn't have to do an awful lot of canvassing.

SO: Do you know how the British government felt?

SR: I don't know. I think – going back to those letters between Harold Wilson and Pierre Trudeau - they felt relaxed. They felt they knew me. They probably didn't approve of a lot of the Non-Aligned stuff. They were not going to oppose a Third World candidate who, they had begun to recognise, had great support.

SO: Was there anyone else in the running before the Kingston CHOGM?

SR: No, except this little thing on the side about Milton Obote, which I only discovered in the Wilson-Trudeau letters. Idi Amin – who had staged a coup against Obote during the Singapore meeting, in early '74 – floated the idea in a letter to Wilson of his nominating Obote to the soon-to-be-vacant position of Secretary General! *[Laughter]*

SO: What a wonderful way to get rid of a political opponent!

SR: Indeed! And, you know, by then Amin was beginning to show all the signs of being an ogre, but he had access to the British government. I will never forget [that] the first capital Amin visited after the coup was London [and] the first Prime Minister he saw after the coup was Ted Heath. So, there was an access there. At that stage, it was more important to Britain to get rid of Obote – who was a thorn in their side – than face Amin. But, of course, they never really knew how bad Amin was, really, with the Third World.

SO: Indeed, a choice between two evils rather than the lesser of two evils.

SR: Right. So, that was the only other mention. It got nowhere, and it was dropped. There was never a suggestion of Obote even knowing anything about it. No African leaders came up and said, "Vote for Milton Obote!" So, I was elected unopposed, basically, at Kingston. The Kingston CHOGM was Arnold's last meeting.

SO: What was the background to that meeting? Obviously there were the formal issues on the agenda, and then there were discussions around the edges.

SR: Well, there was a big economic debate. Arnold had developed a very wise system of organising keynote speakers who would lead off the discussion: it was [about] world economic issues, it was at a time of the New International Economic Order (NIEO), it was big stuff at the UN. He chose Harold Wilson to lead off for the developed countries and Forbes Burnham – my Prime Minister – to lead off for the developing countries. So, the meeting got off to a start, if you like, with these very strongly contending views between Burnham and Wilson. Not acrimonious, but good intellectual stuff. That keynote led to the first of my expert groups, because it decided on an expert group on the New International Economic Order. It was chaired by Sir Alister McIntyre and we never looked back.

SO: Sir, much of the literature on the Commonwealth – and, indeed, the press headlines of the 1970s and, of course, the 1980s – focuses upon Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and South Africa. Did the Commonwealth under your Secretary Generalship develop a particular approach to how you managed liberation movements such as the Patriotic Front in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and the ANC in South Africa?

SR: It wasn't a big choice for me because I came to the job as Foreign Minister of a country that was leading its region in support of these liberation movements: making contributions to the ANC, publically supporting the Patriotic Front in Rhodesia, leading the anti-apartheid effort on isolating South Africa in sport and sanctions, generally. So, that was my background.

SO: Specifically, did the Patriotic Front feature in any way at the Kingston meeting in 1975 or at the subsequent London meeting in 1977? Because, obviously, the 1979 Lusaka meeting was about Rhodesia/Zimbabwe...

SR: [*Laughter*] It featured at Kingston in an unorthodox way, because Arnold would never have organised – or allowed to be organised – what did, in fact, take place, which was that Michael Manley, who was then striking a very radical pose in Jamaica and in the Third World generally, took it upon himself to invite the ‘liberation’ leaders Joshua Nkomo, Bishop Muzorewa and Chief Sithole of the early African National Front to be his personal guests in Kingston, on the occasion of the CHOGM meeting. What I’m sure he told them was, “You leave it to me. I’m going to find a way for you to talk to the Heads.” Now, this was not on the cards in terms of the agenda, or [for] the Secretariat. But Manley did this. It was a secret – even that they were there was a secret. He told the Heads at an early session that they were there and [that] this would be a great opportunity for the Commonwealth to meet with them quietly – to hear from them. And, of course, it would have been a fantastic opportunity for the ‘liberation’ leaders.

SO: An incomparable opportunity, yes.

SR: [*Laughter*] They would never even come within touching distance of the non-African membership. Most of the leaders were quite relaxed about that, but Trudeau of Canada was not.

SO: In 1975, Harold Wilson was still Prime Minister of the UK. Was he relaxed about that?

SR: He was quiet, as Britain had been on most of those situations. The whole of the Round Table was quite happy, so he wasn’t going to be the one to make the fuss. He would have joined the fuss. The person who did make the fuss was Pierre Trudeau – who was, in other respects, supportive of the Patriotic Front. However, Trudeau was a man of considerable principle. He took objection to being “hijacked”, as he described it. He didn’t leave the meeting when Michael brought Nkomo and the others in, but he very publicly and deliberately turned his nameplate ‘CANADA’ upside down and reminded Michael that this was not an official part of the Heads of Government meeting. Yet, he stayed.

SO: Did he? So, his demonstration didn’t include walking out?

SR: No, his demonstration was turning his nameplate over. I suspect that he – like everybody else – was keen to see and hear who these guys were.

SO: Who led the discussion thereafter?

SR: Michael invited Bishop Muzorewa to talk, and they talked at a ‘non-session’ of the meeting.

SO: Do you remember if anyone was putting particular questions or pressing a particular line?

- SR: No, I can't really say that I remember the discussion. It was less of a discussion, as I recall it, than a presentation. Of course, there's no record of the meeting, [*Laughter*] because it wasn't an official part [of the CHOGM].
- SO: So, what was the feeling after Nkomo and the others had left? Was there a general discussion?**
- SR: Well, I think it was a favourable discussion, because, bear in mind, most of the people around the table were supporting them. All the Africans, all the Caribbean people, [and] most of the Asians were in their camp. It was people like the Australians, the Canadians, [and] the New Zealanders for whom this was a revelation. The 'liberation' leaders weren't terrorists; they weren't ogres. They came across very well. That was the real element of my own introduction to the 'liberation' leaders. When I actually came to the Commonwealth Secretary Generalship, I therefore had met some of them at Kingston – though not yet Mugabe – and I very quickly made contact with them.
- SO: Did you maintain that contact?**
- SR: I did. Right through, right through.
- SO: All the way through from 1975?**
- SR: Absolutely.
- SO: So, what of the London meeting in 1977? Was there an element of the Liberation Forces – as they then were – contacting you to present a particular agenda?**
- SR: Yes, they contacted me to that effect, but it was usually on the basis that the Contact Group of African countries would be presenting and I would be facilitating the presentation. They acted not so much through the Secretary General as through the African Contact Group, which was Kenneth Kaunda and Julius Nyerere, essentially. But, with a friendly Secretary General, an environment to the meeting [was created] that was supportive.
- SO: In 1976, Henry Kissinger put forward his 'Africa initiative', when he and the then British Foreign Secretary Anthony Crosland attempted to forcibly encourage Ian Smith to accelerate black majority rule, and there was that 'squeeze play' that involved the South Africans. Were you in any way kept informed of this particular angle of diplomacy?**
- SR: No, no.
- SO: So, you weren't involved in any of the discussions around the need for a development fund?**
- SR: I knew of it. I was told of it, but I was not invited to play a role in it. Indeed, as I sensed the mood from the Foreign Office, it was, "You don't..." [*Laughter*]
- SO: Ah. "This is *our* patch"?**
- SR: "This is our responsibility".

SO: Yes. Did you, in any way, have a watching brief with the Geneva discussions [on Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, chaired by Ivor Richards] between October 1976 and January 1977?

SR: No, I didn't. The British were very keen – the Foreign Office, in particular, [and] Peter Carrington in 1979 was representative of that mood – to keep the Secretariat out of it.

SO: Was this also the attitude and behaviour of Anthony Crosland and David Owen during their respective terms as British Foreign Secretary?

SR: Yes, but Crosland and Owen – and Owen in particular – were more friendly about it. He was not hostile to the Secretariat. For example, there were four African delegations at the Geneva discussions. The Secretariat provided technical assistance to each, and my then Assistant Secretary General Emeka Anyaoku was in Geneva throughout.

SO: Were you kept briefed about the Owen-Vance discussions?

SR: Yes, I knew much more about those. In the first place, I had a good personal relationship with both Cyrus Vance and David Owen. They didn't want me to get in their way, but they weren't hostile.

SO: Were you in any way aware of David Owen's attempts at secret diplomacy? His reaching out to expand the Internal Settlement, to include Joshua Nkomo...?

SR: Yes, I was...

SO: In what way?

SR: ...and I welcomed it.

SO: Yes. You were aware of it? Or were you in any way involved in...

SR: No, I wasn't involved with it. They really wanted it to be their own thing.

SO: Were you in touch with the Nigerians – as well as the Tanzanians and the Zambians – about this particular aspect?

SR: That's right.

SO: Ah, so, you were the recipient of a number of different confidences?

SR: Yes. At that stage, it wasn't hostility to the Secretariat; it was, "We'll keep you informed," and that was fine.

SO: Did you express an opinion when President Nyerere effectively put the brakes on General Garba's attempt to broker the deal with Smith?

SR: I can't remember whether I expressed an opinion, but I was with Nyerere – I was on Nyerere's side in doing that.

SO: Do you mind elaborating a little on that?

SR: [Laughter] Well, I think he felt that they were compromising the position too much. We asked David Owen to get some concessions from Smith, but the proposed deal was not going to be freedom; it was not going to be the end of white rule.

SO: So, it was too much of a political compromise?

SR: It was too much of a compromise.

SO: At that point, the Internal Settlement was protecting white minority political rights. White economic rights were not in any way going to be diluted, either, and land wouldn't have been involved in any way?

SR: No, no.

SO: Ah. And there was also the whole question of the leadership of the security forces...yes.

SR: Absolutely. So, the package as a whole – as Nyerere saw it – was a sell-out.

SO: 'Sell-out' is a very powerful phrase in Zimbabwean politics.

SR: Yes.

SO: Much of the literature about Rhodesia in the 1970s emphasises the role of Zambia. It also emphasises the role of Tanzania. But what of Botswana?

SR: Botswana was coming into its own, but wasn't there yet. Remember, Botswana really came onto the scene with Seretse Khama, and whilst Seretse was there, he was the confidant of Kaunda, Nyerere and, in the early days, of Obote. Then, Seretse died [on 13 July 1980], and there was a kind of gap before the new leadership in Botswana came into its own. In that transition period, Botswana didn't play a formidable role, but as the years went by, they came into their own. They were part of the Contact Group and they exercised more and more influence, and, of course, they were doing better economically by then. They could pull their weight more.

SO: After the discovery of diamonds in 1967, yes.

SR: And then, you know, things developed. SADCC was to come.

SO: I'm very struck by the extent to which Botswana is a Front Line State. It was compromised by its geographical position – sandwiched in between Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and South Africa – which complicated its diplomacy. There was also the presence of the refugees, [and] the presence of armed fighters within the camps. So, this was a difficult diplomatic position to occupy.

SR: Yes, it made it harder for them to be a Front Line State, if you like, [in the manner of a] Zambia or Tanzania. But there was no question where its loyalties lay.

SO: In the 1970s, were you also in close touch with Mozambique on the Rhodesia/Zimbabwe question?

SR: When I came to the Secretariat in 1975, Arnold had already opened the door to Mozambique via Portugal. He had made contact with Soares and he was making it clear that the Commonwealth was a vehicle that had to be taken into account by the Portuguese – that it was ready to do business on the side of FRELIMO. And then Arnold's term ended. So, I came at a very propitious moment. The door had been opened and then I, gradually, through the Contact Group, developed relations.

SO: By the time that you were elected Secretary General, General Spínola had granted accelerated independence to each of the Portuguese territories in Africa.

SR: That's right. Samora Machel was on the scene. This was where my own Non-Aligned contacts helped. And people like Burnham at home helped, because they knew [Machel] and could help me make contacts with them. "Sonny Ramphal? Yes, yes: he's Forbes' Foreign Minister."

SO: That reinforced your credentials?

SR: Absolutely. The whole Guyana connection at that time did.

SO: Did you continue to attend Non-Alignment Movement meetings?

SR: No, no.

SO: I just wondered...The Non-Alignment Movement meeting in Havana in September 1979 was held after the Lusaka CHOGM, and I wondered if you'd gone there.

SR: I didn't go there, but I'll give you a funny little anecdote. Michael Manley was at the height of his radicalism. They had the Havana meeting and he tore up his prepared speech and made a hell-raising speech in support of Fidel Castro, who was adopting the rather absurd position that Cuba was [both] non-aligned and in favour of the East [*Laughter*] – that kind of oxymoron! Michael got caught in this and I got a call at the Secretariat from the airport [in London]. It was Julius Nyerere, going back home from Cuba, and he asked me to come and see him at the airport. He was changing planes, so I went up and he used me as a kind of battering ram to vent his anger about Michael...Because Julius saw that the future of non-alignment lay in *non-alignment*!

SO: And that meant 'equidistance', not leaning to one side.

SR: That's right. "Sonny, why did Michael do this?" [*Laughter*] – as if I was responsible for Michael! "This was terrible." He ranted and raved and so on – "You must bring him back into line!" [*Laughter*] I calmed him down and said, "Of course, I agree with you." I did make my own representation to Michael. I said, "Look, you're losing your friends, you know. I don't know how much Julius told you, but this is what he told me...And he's got a point." [*Laughter*]

SO: And how did that go down?

SR: Oh, it went down well with Michael, because we were very good friends.

SO: What you're talking about here is the extraordinary role of personal networks...

SR: Absolutely.

SO: ...and personalities.

SR: Absolutely. By then, Michael had developed a personal rapport with Malcolm Fraser. He had Malcolm Fraser in Jamaica, so things were happening in the Commonwealth at the one-to-one level – some of which I didn't even know about or knew about afterwards; some of which I was involved in. But that personal relationship was vital, and Michael Manley was very important. Malcolm Fraser was very important. Mulroney was important.

SO: Do you think cricket helped at all in that?

SR: Yes, it did. It was the Commonwealth's game and the Caribbean made some of the biggest sacrifices for it because – again, led by Guyana – the Caribbean was totally behind the isolation of South Africa and punished its own cricketers for breaking ranks. I remember Kallicharran in Guyana was banned [*Laughter*] because he went to South Africa.

SO: I was thinking, also, more in the way of how a love of cricket provided a bond between leaders.

SR: I suppose. Behind that is the love of cricket, but cricket was a vehicle through which they could exercise sanctions and they thought – and I agreed – that the sporting boycott was very significant, very important to South Africa. It was a tool that – in the very special circumstances of South Africa – hurt.

SO: Yes. As South Africa was a 'sports mad' nation, sports sanctions really would touch their national pride. In the 1970s, there were, of course, other important issues which were building up steam, one of which was the role of the ANC within South African politics. The ANC was not yet the designated voice of the South African people. I'm just wondering...What was the particular relationship, the diplomacy, between the ANC and the Secretary General in the 1970s?

SR: It was always as close as we could make it. That was facilitated by the fact that Zambia – particularly Zambia – provided the access to the ANC. My first meeting with Oliver Tambo was in Lusaka, where, after all, he was a guest. I always had a slight worry which I didn't articulate publicly: how would the ANC feel about the Commonwealth and Commonwealth membership, when we 'won' [*Laughter*], colloquially? When we got to the stage where apartheid was over [and] the ANC was in power, how would they feel about Commonwealth membership? Would they, as it were, vent their anger on Britain with an old-fashioned notion that the Commonwealth was British – which it was when they went into exile? Eventually, I broached the question with Oliver in Lusaka. We were then close enough to be 'Oliver' and 'Sonny'. I said to him in a reflective mood, "Oliver, how are you going to feel about Commonwealth

membership? Will you be ready to come back?" In that wonderful yet piercing way he had of looking at you, he said, "Sonny, black South Africa never left the Commonwealth." Well, I was so delighted but I was flabbergasted. It was so profound. Why didn't I think of that myself? *[Laughter]* Here was the leader of the ANC saying, "It's not a question. It's not an issue. We never left."

SO: Your soul must have expanded at that point.

SR: *[Laughter]* It did, it did. It meant so much more in terms of the struggle.

SO: Yes, it would have done: hugely important, going forward. And what of other people in the 1970s, such as Abdul Minty, the spokesman for the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain?

SR: People like Abdul saw the Commonwealth as a friend. We had frequent contacts with him because, of course, he was in Europe and we had contacts with any of those who were able to travel. I think they all looked on us as genuine. We had as big a fight with the British government as they had, and we weren't hiding it.

SO: Do you recall whether Abdul Minty sought Commonwealth support from the Secretariat and the Secretary General on the question of whether or not South Africa had developed a nuclear weapon? When the South African government did achieve nuclear capability, it took the struggle in Southern Africa to a completely different level.

SR: Yes, it did. We talked about it and, of course, the implication was that white South Africa had joined the nuclear club, and the obligation to support a club member was that much stronger so far as the Americans and the British were concerned. But this was very much at the personal level. We never, as I recall it, made it a kind of public issue.

SO: Looking through the files at the Secretariat, there is one small record of a UN seminar [on 'Nuclear Collaboration with South Africa'] that was held in February 1979. But there is no note of discussion elsewhere in the Secretariat files. Having found this seminar report, I thought, "Where else was the talk going on?"

SR: It would have been between Minty and myself.

SO So, it redoubled your determination?

SR: Oh, absolutely. For me, there was never any question as to which way we had to go. I knew the mass of the Commonwealth was with me, and as important to me as anything else was the fact that the white Commonwealth as represented by Australia and Canada was with me. This was both political parties, and that was quite phenomenal because they didn't have black communities. There were no votes in it for them: for Malcolm Fraser or for Bob Hawke, or for Mulroney or Trudeau.

SO: So, it was determination for social justice?

SR: Yes, absolutely.

SO: When you were Secretary General in the 1970s, how far was Uganda a complicating factor for the Commonwealth?

SR: It was a complicating factor because Obote had been very prominent in the early stages of the anti-apartheid struggle, both intellectually and politically. At Singapore, he was a prominent black voice.

SO: And then there was the coup.

SR: And then he couldn't leave! *[Laughter]*

SO: How did that hit the Singapore meeting? Obviously, you were there...

SR: Well, it didn't hit the conference because it happened as the conference ended, so it never became a factor in the conference. But what was complicating was the fact that Amin was so well received by Britain. The first capital in the Commonwealth that Amin visited was London. The first Prime Minister he was greeted by was Ted Heath – warmly, at Downing Street. That did not go down very well, and four years later the Uganda issue became a dominant issue at Gleneagles. It posed a very important challenge for me in terms of what kind of leadership should come from the Secretary General. You need to cast your mind back to 1975-77, when the issue of non-interference in internal affairs was dogma. It wasn't like now. It was dogma then. So, the UN wouldn't touch Uganda. The Human Rights Commission in Geneva wouldn't take it on its agenda. It was internal affairs. I took it on at Gleneagles and made a presentation to the Heads at the Retreat in which I tried to intellectualise the right to interfere. The way I dealt with it was to say that, "There is a line beyond which abuse of human rights and human dignity anywhere in the world becomes the world's business. I don't know how you draw the line, and it hasn't been drawn yet, but there are situations when you know that, wherever that line is, it has been crossed, and that's Uganda. However that line has been drawn, it's been crossed. When it's crossed, it's the right of everyone – *especially* members of the Commonwealth – to condemn."

SO: How did that go down?

SR: It went down pretty well, because everybody at the time wanted to square condemnation with maintenance of the principle of non-interference. So, you weren't breaching the principle but you were saying, "It's gone too far." Without having to define what is "too far".

SO: But in strict legal terms, after all, non-interference was the basis of South Africa's claim to international legality and sovereignty.

SR: Absolutely, and I drew on that.

SO: "We must be consistent"?

SR: "We must be consistent," and they were: they condemned Amin. It didn't do much more, but it was a big step for Africa and for the Commonwealth to condemn the abuse of human rights in an African country. The interesting thing was that, two weeks later, the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva took the same line. They came out and condemned Amin.

SO: Backtracking a little bit, did condemnation in any way extend to the Commonwealth as a diplomatic actor taking a stance on the issue of the expulsion of Ugandan Asians? Or was that really a bilateral issue between Kampala and London?

SR: No, it didn't.

SO: After this 1977 condemnation by the Commonwealth of the Amin regime's human rights record, did Commonwealth diplomacy play out in any other way towards Uganda?

SR: Yes, it did. We promoted anything that would get rid of Amin. I had a big struggle at that very conference – before the condemnation – with Prime Minister James Callaghan, because the 1977 meeting was chaired by Callaghan. I took the early position with Callaghan, one-to-one, of, "Don't worry, Amin isn't going to come. I'm going to see to it that he doesn't come." I didn't know how I was going to do it, [*Laughter*] but my notion was that I'd get the Africans to make it clear to Amin that he was not welcome.

SO: But Amin very definitely wanted to come.

SR: Very definitely! But we put so much pressure on them, and he was such a consummate showman.

SO: How did the 'squeeze-play' work?

SR: [*Laughter*] Well, it worked through the Africans and through me, personally, saying that it would be very disruptive.

SO: Was there one key lever?

SR: [*Laughter*] What did count was the British making it very clear that he was not welcome.

SO: When you say "the British", which aspect of....?

SR: It would be diplomacy – British Ambassadors, British messages from Downing Street...

SO: Ah, okay. It wouldn't have come from the Palace?

SR: Not the palace; not the palace, at all. It would have come from Downing Street. And Amin gave me the impression [that], "It's all right; I'm not going to come." I, in turn, reassured Callaghan that he wasn't coming, because Callaghan, by then, was terrified of the political fall-out in Britain if Amin did come: the fallout for him, the fallout for the Commonwealth. All went well until two days before the CHOGM was to open, when I got a screaming message from Callaghan, [asking me] to come and see him. So, I pelted over to Downing Street. He said, "Sonny, you told me all was going to be well! It's not well! Amin is in an aeroplane over Ireland. We're not going to give him landing rights. But this is now a big diplomatic incident!" I said, "Who told you he's in an aeroplane?" Callaghan said, "Our intelligence sources tell us." I said, "Well, I have not heard anything from Uganda, which suggests that he has left

Uganda and I would have thought that was likely to happen.” He said, “Look, I’m giving you two hours.” Until then, I had schooled him never to say, “You can’t come”: “This is a member of the Commonwealth. As host, you can’t say that to a member.” So, what he was telling me was, “I’m giving you two hours and then all bets are off. [Laughter] I am going to say to Amin, ‘You’re not going to be allowed to land’.” Well, it was pretty frantic. I got in touch with the whole of the Front Line States. They all said to me they didn’t think that he had left Uganda, and I reassured Callaghan that this was my information. “Be very careful about this message, because Amin is a showman.” Thank God, within two hours, it was established that he was very much in Kampala. He had let it be known to the press that he was coming.

SO: Because that would have provoked a public declaration by the British Government, and then he could assume the persona of an affronted, excluded Commonwealth leader.

SR: And I would have been in a position where I would have had to say I couldn’t sanction it.

SO Did you ever go to Kampala?

SR: At an early stage, yes. I felt that I had to make a move as the new Secretary General, and I made an official visit to Uganda. I took my wife with me and Amin was the epitome of charm. There was no hostility emanating from him; he was a good Commonwealth man. He welcomed the Secretary General, he got my wife to open an exhibition that he was to have opened, and stood down so that she could do it. Then he said [that], as the centrepiece of this welcome, he was going to open a game park, which was something that he prized very highly. And he was going to name it after me: ‘The Ramphal Game Park’.

SO: Better than a shopping centre!

SR: [Laughter] He then decided he was going to fly us, himself, by helicopter, because this game park was about 300 miles from Kampala.

SO: Did he have a helicopter pilot’s licence?

SR: I’ve no idea! [Laughter] But, he flew it. My wife, Lois, was with me. We were terrified!

SO: I bet you were! [Laughter]

SR: But he flew it very competently, and we landed at this remote game park – then called the Queen Elizabeth Game Park. The whole diplomatic corps was there. I was introduced to them and I thought they were a pretty surly lot. They didn’t look at all happy and didn’t really greet me. Something was wrong! Eventually, I remember, the German ambassador took me aside and he said, “Look, nobody’s going to tell you if I don’t tell you, but we do this at least once every three months. What is more, we have to drive!” [Laughter]

SO: So, you said, “Well, after that helicopter ride, I wish I had, too!” [Laughter]

SR: That's the level of the games that Amin was up to.

SO: **As you say, buffoonery, but dangerous buffoonery.**

SR: Very, very dangerous.

SO: **When the civil war erupted, was the Commonwealth in any way in touch with Museveni's forces, thinking ahead of what was likely to happen?**

SR: No, not at all.

SO: **Were you in any way aware of Tanzania's particular interest in the outcome?**

SR: Oh, yes. I, like most of the Commonwealth, was pleased that Tanzania engaged. Although, in fact, they did cross over into Uganda and I remember Trudeau – again, out of principle – saying he couldn't support Tanzania invading Uganda.

SO: **Was the Tanzanian High Commission here in London giving you detailed briefs about what was going on?**

SR: Yes. The High Commissioner, Tony Nyaki, was especially close to Julius, who took the right line: "We followed them across the border; we didn't invade."

SO: **So, the Ugandan army overstepped the line: a question of 'dynamics on the ground'. I have one last question about the 1970s and other internal problems which you felt might have required a statement from you. One such issue was Northern Ireland. Did the Commonwealth act behind the headlines in any way on the Northern Ireland issue?**

SR: No, not until later. Not in that early stage. And I didn't think there was any disposition from any quarter in the Commonwealth to act.

SO: **But, the 1980s, in the run up to the Anglo-Irish agreement...**

SR: Yes, I made a visit to Northern Ireland.

SO: **Were you invited or was this on your own initiative?**

SR: Well, I wanted to go, and then I got invited to make a speech. I went – with the blessing of the Foreign Office – and made my reconciliation speech.

SO: **Were the Secretary General's 'good offices' used in any way?**

SR: No. Again, it was Britain: this was a domestic matter. I don't think Britain wanted the Commonwealth to get involved at all.

SO: **But did Ireland want the Commonwealth involved?**

SR: No, no.

SO: **Ireland seems to have paid particular attention to the Commonwealth since its withdrawal in 1949.**

SR: Later on, in the days of Garrett FitzGerald, I had personal contacts with him and that was his disposition.

SO: But in the 1970s and 80s, leading up to the Anglo-Irish agreement, this was not an encouraged role on your side?

SR: No, no.

SO: Sir Sonny, thank you very much indeed. If I could come back to you again to continue this discussion, that would be excellent.

[END OF AUDIOFILE PART ONE]