



## The World's Top Cop

### *A Talk with Ronald K. Noble*

*Ronald K. Noble is secretary-general of Interpol, the world's largest international police organization, with 188 member countries. Created in 1923, it facilitates cross-border police cooperation, and supports all organizations that prevent or combat international crime. It has been especially active in the face of rising threats from terrorism, cyber-crime, international drug trafficking, and corruption. Nine years ago, Noble was elected the seventh secretary-general—the first American to hold this position. Previously, he served as under secretary for enforcement of the Treasury Department, in charge of the U.S. Secret Service, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and numerous other agencies. Earlier, he served as an assistant U.S. attorney and deputy assistant attorney general. Noble spoke by telephone from Interpol's general secretariat headquarters in Lyons, France with World Policy Journal editor David A. Andelman and European reporter Charlotte Pudlowski in Paris.*

**WORLD POLICY JOURNAL:** From the uniquely global perspective of Interpol, do you see much change—up or down—in the scope, the reach, or the frequency of corruption? And, is there a chicken and egg syndrome when it comes to the nexus of corruption and crime?

**RONALD K. NOBLE:** I've been secretary-general for about nine years and,

from the beginning, corruption has always been a problem. There's certainly a heightened media focus on the issue, and Interpol is also paying greater attention to the problem than when I first began my term. About the chicken or the egg: from my perspective, I see corruption often linked to otherwise legitimate business activity, not pure criminal conduct. But one begets the other. The more lucrative a contract, the more urgent the need to fill this contract; the more government officials with discretionary powers to decide on whether or not this contract should be filled and by whom, the greater the likelihood of corruption. Because there has been a greater movement of products—a greater movement of people—over the years, there have been greater opportunities for corruption. You're doing business in my country, you want to pass my border, you want to get a license, get a variance, or whatever...if I have discretionary power as a government official, it's an opportunity for me to make money.

**WPJ:** But in the Western world, and in many other developed countries, that would be considered a crime, right?

**NOBLE:** The OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] and others have been trying to get more countries to make it a crime to bribe a

foreign official. As nations have signed on and made it illegal to do so, we're seeing more of these cases being made and offenders brought to justice. But to the extent there is an opportunity for a businessman or businesswoman to bribe a government official, and not get caught, the motivation is often there. And if you have two willing participants, proving that the bribe occurred is sometimes a difficult matter.

**WPJ:** We see increasing instances of cyber-crime, international financial crime of greater sophistication, new forms of terrorism—what concerns you about this shift?

**NOBLE:** There is a lot more fraud going on now, a lot more opportunity for people to steal your money without ever leaving their home, a lot more opportunity for people to steal your identity and therefore get access to your accounts. In terms of terrorism, our view is that terrorists often benefit from corrupt government officials, especially when it comes to identity documents. So you bribe a person to get a false driver's license, to get a false passport, and in that sense terrorism's link to corruption is clearer than it otherwise would be. Also, to move explosives or other products from point A to point B, you tend to buy government officials, customs, or border patrol officials along the way.

**WPJ:** Let's back up and look at underlying causes of crime and corruption. Is it poverty, lack of education, democracy or its absence; is it desperation?

**NOBLE:** I think it depends on where you are in the world. If you don't have the opportunity to earn a living—and here I'm speaking really about police, border control, and government officials—then that's where corruption can breed. It's easier to bribe an official who is being paid \$70 a month than one who's being paid \$3,000 a month. And if you look at police and border officials around the world, you will see great discrepancy from country to country—some

where you have a great salary and great opportunity to provide for a family, and those where you don't. It's not that I'm trying to justify it. I'm just trying to explain that there's a relationship between one's ability to earn a good living and one's likelihood to give in to the temptation of bribes.

Having said that, I want to make clear that corruption and bribery occur at all levels and in all countries around the world. From Interpol's perspective, when I started nine years ago there were only five to ten countries that had specialized anti-corruption agencies or bureaus. Now, there's as many as 26 countries with specialized agencies targeting and trying to prevent, investigate, and prosecute corruption.

In terms of the root causes of crime, the Internet has provided extraordinary opportunities for financial crimes, mischief, and the destruction of infrastructure. Just look at the number of malicious codes or the incidence of bank frauds that occur now around the world. Organized criminal groups will go online and steal small amounts, maybe \$1,000 to \$2,000 from accounts that might total \$50,000 or \$200,000. They will do that for 30 days in bank A, and then move to bank B, then bank C, and so on. At the end of the year, they have stolen tens of millions of dollars, euros, or pounds, largely facilitated through the Internet.

This has just brought a level of criminal activity that law enforcement, for the most part, is unable to deal with—because it crosses borders, it's expensive to investigate; it's difficult to track the person or group that's responsible; and it's difficult to find jurisdiction. And much of this criminal conduct in the area of fraud occurs below the radar. If it's a multimillion-dollar fraud that you're engaged in, law enforcement will target you. But if a criminal is engaged in fraud on the level of \$20,000, \$30,000, \$40,000 at one bank and then moves on

to another, in most cases the bank is just happy to be done with it—and in many cases, banks are reluctant to share information with security officials because of their concerns about privacy.

**WPJ:** So are you suggesting that tools don't exist to go after these people, or is it perhaps a matter of will?

**NOBLE:** I'm saying the tools do exist, but if you were to look at the cost-benefit analysis of going after international fraud involving \$20,000 or \$30,000, most national law enforcement agencies would probably decide it's too expensive to investigate the case.

**WPJ:** So, in what ways has Interpol succeeded in adapting new technologies to combat crime?

**NOBLE:** Back before I became secretary-general, back before 9/11, before the Internet really took off, for the most part we didn't have all of our member countries connected. It was very costly to gather information internationally. Now, Interpol allows member countries to enter information through our secure global police communications system and consult our databases themselves.

The most profound impact we have had is in the area of passport screening and control. Seven or eight years ago, our database of stolen and lost travel documents had about 3,000 passports and other identity documents that had been listed as lost or stolen. Now we have over 20 million stolen or lost documents in our database, including more than 11 million passports. In 2002, there were a couple of thousand searches of the database a year. If you can believe it, in 2009, there were over 300 million.

As for using the Internet, in 2007, we engaged in a global manhunt for a person who had been videotaped sexually abusing young boys in Southeast Asia. The images were all over the web. We went globally,

using the person's image, and solicited responses via the Internet from Asia, Europe, and the Americas—we identified and located the person in 11 days. The next year, we apprehended a U.S. citizen in this manner in just 48 hours.

When I was a prosecutor in the United States some time ago, you had to physically transmit the video to investigators from state to state. Now we can send encrypted,



encoded images of a child being sexually abused or images of the abuser. But more importantly, we can use software to match rooms, sofas, outlets, paintings, windows, light sockets, or door knobs, and determine where in the world the photograph was taken. We do this the same way we automate fingerprint comparisons—narrow it down from 10 billion images to maybe a 1,000 images, and from 1,000 images to 500.

Another area where we are making progress is medical product counterfeiting. We can now take a counterfeit pill or anti-malarial drug and determine, based on the ingredients, where the pill was made—

allowing us to go to that country and ask them to assist us. Additionally, we have greater cooperation with customs and regulatory agencies and the police, which is critical to making cases.

Technology has helped us make a case more efficiently and effectively than we otherwise would have been able to. But if you were to look at all of the fraud going on via the Internet and ask me whether law enforcement can keep up, I'll tell you we can't—not nationally and not internationally. That's why it's important for us to pick select cases and make people worry that their case might be the one we decide to focus on and investigate next.

**WPJ:** Top of mind in the United States and much of Europe these days is Afghanistan. There seems to be considerable evidence that the Taliban could not function without their links to the global drug trade. Can Interpol play a role by closing the route to this critical fiscal lubricant?

**NOBLE:** First, I endorse the view that the Taliban is profiting greatly from the trafficking in drugs. But Interpol's view is that to the extent that you don't have a national presence, a law enforcement presence, a security apparatus, or rule of law in place, it would be difficult for anyone to come in and enforce a rule of law, even if, hypothetically, that was in Interpol's authority. You don't speak the language, don't understand the community, don't have the same informants, the same network—it's just difficult to do.

**WPJ:** But if you cut off the drugs as they begin to cross the Afghan border into another jurisdiction, maybe then there's a way of interdicting the traffic?

**NOBLE:** I agree wholeheartedly—you've just hit the nail on the head. If you have control of your border and you can regulate the flow of people or goods across it, you have a better chance. Right now, the Afghan border with Pakistan is not a border

that anyone has fully effective control over. Interpol's position is unless you have a solid law enforcement structure, respect by civil society for the rule of law, and opportunities for people to earn a living in legitimate ways, then you are going to have problems with drug trafficking and smuggling. Afghanistan, however, is still really lacking control by law enforcement as to what's going on inside the country. So, once you cross the border, you are able to get the product out into the market very easily.

At Interpol, what we try to ask is how we can add value. We don't have armed agents that travel the world. One of the ways we are trying to help in Afghanistan is with basic policing—when you stop someone and interrogate them, or when you arrest or put them in prison. You take their photographs and fingerprints and compare that information against national and global databases to determine whether or not the people who are of interest to you are of interest to other police around the world. To give you a concrete example, moving away from Afghanistan, Interpol has been working with law enforcement sources in Iraq and in the United States, Canada, France, and other countries, so that every time a person is arrested for suspicion of terrorism, his fingerprints, DNA, and photographs are compared against Interpol's global databases. For example, as a result, we have made matches between cases involving suspected terrorists arrested in Iraq with others wanted for arrest for involvement in the Casablanca, Morocco, bombing in 2003.

**WPJ:** And what about extradition?

**NOBLE:** What Interpol does as a police agency is we facilitate the identification, location, and apprehension of people who are wanted for arrest internationally. Once a person has been apprehended, it depends on the bilateral relations between the country seeking extradition and the country that's going to consider granting extradition as to

whether or not it occurs. But whether or not a criminal gets extradited is somewhat secondary. Once he's been arrested, that person is known and off the streets—in that country at least. For example, there was a person wanted in the U.S. for having raped a child who went to Southeast Asia to teach English to young children. Interpol helped identify him and he was apprehended there. But even if the extradition takes a long time, he is not going to go back and teach English to Southeast Asian children and thereby subject to them to the possibility of being raped or sexually abused. So one issue is identifying, locating, and apprehending, and the second issue is extradition.

**WPJ:** Are you frustrated at times about how the system works? With 188 members, is it still too clunky?

**NOBLE:** I am not frustrated. To the contrary, we have 188 sovereign members, and if a nation knows that someone is wanted for arrest by another country for a crime of violence, fraud, or whatever it might be, and that sovereign country decides to let that person run free, that government is going to have to pay the political price if that person engages in criminal conduct.

What frustrates me, as secretary-general—and this is relevant in light of what happened in Dubai in the case of the individuals accused of having assassinated a Hamas leader—is that in 2009 there were over 500 million international air arrivals where passports were *not* checked against Interpol's database, which contains records on over 11 million stolen passports and 9 million other identity documents. At the same time, if you or I are traveling internationally via the United States or Europe, we are required to take off our shoes and belts, give up our bags and our computers, and sacri-

fice whatever liquids we might not have consumed before passing through security. We do that for everyone. But each year, there are 500 million international air arrivals whose passports aren't screened against Interpol's database. And we have the technology to identify false passports being used by war criminals, terrorists, assassins,

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drug traffickers, and fraudsters. That's what is most shocking and frustrating to me.

**WPJ:** Are there regions or countries that are most egregious in failing to check these documents?

**NOBLE:** I'll flip it around. There are only 40 or so countries in the world that actually *do* screen passports against Interpol's database. The United States is one of them. As recently as two years ago, when the U.S. was trying to put this system in place, they were only screening our database 2,000 times per year, and came up with 80 or so hits. Last year, the U.S. conducted 78 million searches, which resulted in almost 4,000 people being caught in possession of passports that had been reported lost or stolen. These individuals were prevented from entering the United States, or were interviewed or interrogated upon arrival. Previously, they would otherwise have been able to get in.

**WPJ:** Of the 40 or so nations that are screening passports effectively, are most of these OECD countries?

**NOBLE:** There is no explanation for who's doing it and who's not. The leaders are the U.K.—which screened our database over 130 million times—the U.S., Brazil,

Switzerland, Singapore, and France. But when the Caribbean was hosting the Cricket World Cup in 2007, they needed help to try to prevent terrorists from targeting this event. So Interpol put this database and system of passport screening in place. Now, the Caribbean as a region is one of the top scanners of our database. Senegal just connected, along with certain Gulf countries. I can't think of any good reason to explain why other countries have not connected to this database—considering the risk of a terrorist, rapist, or murderer walking into your country in possession of a fraudulent passport.

**WPJ:** Let's take Iran, where a lot of recent attention has focused on attempts to buy components that can be used in nuclear weapons. This begs the question of whether Iran is really part of the global community. Are they cooperative in any of Interpol's programs or initiatives?

**NOBLE:** Iran is a member of Interpol. Its cooperation is actually quite strong, especially in the area of anti-drug trafficking, and they have shared information and hosted meetings on this fight. Recently, five Iranian nationals were stopped in the Caribbean carrying stolen Swedish passports. Interpol was concerned they might be human traffickers, organized criminals, or terrorists, and we were able to get information from Iran on these people. So, in fact, Iran cooperates with Interpol.

But there are Interpol member countries that don't cooperate with Iran and countries with which Iran doesn't cooperate. Iran is a unique case, because from Interpol's perspective, it does cooperate with us on a variety of cases, but from other member countries' perspectives, they may or may not cooperate with Iran depending on the case. One of Interpol's strengths is that it allows each country to decide how much information to share with whatever country it wishes. Our view is that unless police cooperate globally, terrorists and criminals

will simply go to the countries that are not connected.

**WPJ:** Are there many instances of this?

**NOBLE:** All the time. We find that countries which are not screening passports against our database are the very places where organized criminals or even assassins show up. And we know that criminals monitor what Interpol is doing in terms of border control. Take the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. The mastermind who entered the U.S. was an Iraqi, carrying an Iraqi passport at a time when Iraq and the United States weren't cooperating. The passport had been reported stolen by Iraq, but of course that information never got to the U.S. at the time Ramzi Yousef crossed the border and ended up masterminding the first World Trade Center bombing.

**WPJ:** What new resources or tools does Interpol need to monitor and control future threats?

**NOBLE:** First on my wish list is that the world's leaders recognize that it's in every country's best interest to make sure their borders are monitored 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by people who are connected to Interpol databases. Why? International criminals recognize they can commit a crime in one place and simply flee to countries that are not connected. Second, all countries should screen the passports of all international air arrivals against Interpol databases. Third, when terrorists or dangerous prisoners escape from prison, there should be an international protocol that requires Interpol to be alerted so that all member countries can be notified. Finally, I'd like to see some recognition from countries around the world that they are aware that when resources are going to corrupt officials, less gets done than otherwise would. For that reason, we need global support for the world's first international anti-corruption academy, which Interpol hopes to establish soon. That would be a great thing. ●