

# Northern Ireland-born cybercrime expert says Troubles experience sparked global career

A United Nations cybercrime expert based in Africa has told how his background growing up in Northern Ireland motivated him towards a career fighting global terrorism.

Father-of-four Neil Walsh from Glengormley works as the UN's regional representative in Eastern Africa, helping governments in 13 countries to combat organised criminality.

During his career, he has worked in law enforcement agencies around the world, including assisting the FBI following the September 11 attacks in New York.

Explaining his background, he told the PA News Agency: "In my early teens, I was close to a car-bomb explosion in Belfast's High Street when the IRA targeted a police car.

"Being so close – yet unharmed – really changed me. I saw death in the streets. Indiscriminate, pointless, stupid terrorists causing immeasurable harm. So I decided I wanted to do something about it."

Mr Walsh originally wanted to train as an air ambulance surgeon, before deciding to study psychology and criminality and later joining the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS).

He said: "NCIS collected and analysed covertly intelligence about the world's most challenging drug, weapon and people traffickers. After September 11 happened, almost everyone moved into counter-terrorist operations.

“This led me to deploying in the Middle East and USA – and gave the taste of working with foreign partners on a common mission. I was hooked. The NCIS later merged with three other agencies to become the Serious Organised Crime Agency (Soca) and then the National [Crime](#) Agency (NCA).

“I emerged from covert roles and was selected to become an international liaison officer based at Europol, the EU’s law enforcement intelligence agency in The Hague and, after four years, moved to the British High Commission in Malta.”

Mr Walsh then moved to the United Nations.

He said: “I saw a job advertised to lead cybercrime work for the UN in Vienna and I applied, not thinking that I had any chance of success. But I got the job and left UK Government in 2015.

“I served in the cybercrime role for two years and then took on the terrorist-financing and anti-money-laundering portfolios, too. So the combination of my law enforcement, overseas and political experience really came together perfectly.

“My work started with training cops, prosecutors and judges in South East Asia, Central America and Africa. Over the next few years, it evolved into a political role, working with countries to form alliances to counter cybercrime internationally.

“I spent much of my time jumping between Vienna, New York, Beijing and Bangkok.”

He then moved into his current role in Africa.

He said: “I’ve been based in Nairobi, Kenya, since December 2021 and am ambassador – regional representative in our parlance – to Eastern Africa. My role now is political – working to support the 13 countries I cover to counter

organised crime, terrorism and corruption.

“Last week, I was in Saudi Arabia and now I’m flying to Uganda to meet the president, having spent the day with the crown princess of Sweden and crown prince of Norway to explain how their countries support our work.

“Next week, I’m with the president and prime minister of Madagascar before heading to my old home in Vienna to meet with many countries on the risks from synthetic opioids, like fentanyl.”

Despite his successful career, Mr Walsh has battled health issues after being diagnosed with rectal cancer aged 26 and colon cancer aged 38.

He said: “The treatment for the second cancer led to me having multiple brain haemorrhages, a cardiac arrest and now I’ve developed osteoporosis and two inflammatory bowel diseases.

“Bum conversations can be awkward or embarrassing, but if I’d been more robust with my GP, and less afraid to have a camera in my bum, my life may have been much easier.

“Despite the impacts that this has had on me, I still get to wake up every day, still get to go to the best job in the world and still get to try and make a difference and prevent the horrors of Northern Ireland from happening elsewhere.

“I guess I’m a workaholic but I still make time for my four amazing kids and my amazing wife, they have put up with so much because of me. No matter where I go, Northern Ireland will always be where I come from and will always draw me back once or twice a year.”

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