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**Speech by The Rt. Hon. Mr Jack Straw, Secretary of
State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs of the
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
at 59th Session of the General Assembly**

23 September 2004

STRICTLY EMBARGOED UNTIL 1800 EST / 2300 BST ON 23 SEPTEMBER

SPEECH BY THE FOREIGN SECRETARY TO
THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
NEW YORK, 23 SEPTEMBER 2004

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr President,

Congratulations on your election.

Eighteen months ago, the United Nations faced divisions more serious than any since the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. We all worried whether the strength and unity which we had built up since the end of the Cold War could survive.

Then last year we saw Kofi Annan standing at his now famous fork in the road. But in the year since, almost instinctively, we have decided to follow our Secretary-General's directions. This Organisation has not been plunged into paralysis: instead, I have felt a powerful if unspoken determination to make the United Nations work, and work more effectively, to fulfil its central task: to secure peace around the world.

Over the last 12 months we have dealt with new crises like that in Darfur in Sudan, where we have set clear tasks for the Sudanese Government and the rebel groups. We have tackled the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Great Lakes; mobilised international support for the new Iraq; and addressed a long list of hugely-important subjects which rarely receive the coverage they should in the media – Haiti, Georgia, Timor-Leste, Bougainville, Western Sahara.

We have shown in these actions the unity of purpose which is one of the strongest weapons in our hands to defeat the evils which today afflict the globe. And the search for consensus has not been confined to the Security Council. I am proud that just a few months after the difficult times of early last year, France, Germany and the United Kingdom came together to work, as we continue to do, on the Iran dossier before the International Atomic Energy Agency.

I recognise, of course, the frustrations before all of us, not least over the Israel-Palestine conflict – where the clear path to peace set out in the Roadmap and endorsed by the Security Council remains elusive. But all in all we have shown the will to make collective action work – though we know, too, that we need to go further. In particular, we need to get better at tackling threats which have changed dramatically since the UN's foundation. Today the greatest threats to our security often come not from other functioning sovereign states, but from terrorist organisations, from failing states, and from man-made shocks to our environment like climate change, which can exacerbate state failure and breed internal instability.

The High-Level Panel appointed by the Secretary-General is preparing its recommendations for how we can address these challenges. We should remember that we have one great advantage. Though its institutions and the founding text of the Charter has hardly changed in 60 years, the United Nations is not an Organisation set in stone – but a set of living institutions based on a shared will to make collective security work. It has adapted in the past – with the development of peacekeeping, a greater focus on individual rights, or the setting of global targets for development. I am confident that it can adapt in the future.

Of course, institutional change is part of that. We are conscious in particular of the need to widen the membership of the Security Council. At the UN's foundation, one-eighth of its members could expect to be elected members of the Security Council at any one time. Today it is less than one-eighteenth. The United Kingdom has long supported the case for expanding the Security Council to say 24 members, including amongst the permanent membership Germany and Japan – two countries which between them contribute 28 per cent of the UN's budget –; India, which represents one sixth of the world's population; and Brazil, which just missed permanent membership in 1945.

But we should not see an expansion of the Security Council, or other institutional change, as a panacea. The bigger need is to adapt our common understanding, the UN's jurisprudence if you like, and its operational effectiveness – so that we can respond more quickly and more thoroughly to today's new threats.

Let me highlight three areas which to me seem particularly important. First, our approach must be broader, tackling threats to the most vulnerable, such as poverty, disease and environmental degradation. Second, we must build a new consensus by expanding the scope of collective action. And third, we must deal with the threat of terrorism which menaces us all and everything for which we stand.

Mr President,

So, first – the need for a broader approach which addresses the complex and interdependent nature of security today.

Here, we have to do more to meet the Millennium Development Goals and promote sustainable development, especially in Africa. And we must do so not just because of our concern for justice and our common humanity; but also to reduce the stresses on states and peoples which affect our collective security. We can't have security without development, or development without security.

As the Secretary-General highlighted in his speech on Tuesday, we have to do more to entrench the rule of law and justice, especially in states recovering from conflict. The

UK will pursue work on the Secretary-General's report during our Security Council Presidency next month.

We could also use the UN to agree, to monitor and to help to implement globally-accepted norms of good governance, helping to stop unstable states from failing and building the transparency and accountability which create the conditions for lasting security and prosperity.

And we need to act together, quickly, on climate change – perhaps the greatest long-term threat to our world in terms of stability and security, not just the environment. We must begin by implementing Kyoto; and we must also agree emissions reductions beyond 2012.

Mr President,

Second is the need to build a new consensus on the scope of collective action.

We all represent independent, sovereign states. But even as we founded the UN we recognised that sovereignty was a trust in the hands of a nation's government: there to be respected, not abused, either from without or within. An abuse from without could be dealt with through the inherent right of self defence recognised in Article 51 of the Charter. But an abuse from within which threatens the peace could and should be dealt with by the Security Council under the powers enshrined in the other articles of Chapter VII of the Charter, and by the many Conventions within the UN framework, including, for example, the 1948 Genocide Convention. No longer could or should the world turn away from unspeakable barbarities like the Holocaust.

We have not however always lived up to all that – as the tragedies of Rwanda and Bosnia ten years ago remind us. But today we must resolve to do so and to engage – both in situations of humanitarian catastrophe or grave violations of international humanitarian law, and in the face of other threats to international peace and security. The principle of non-interference has to be accompanied by an expectation that governments will respect the rights of their citizens. Where they do not, the international community will need to consider how to react.

So we need for example to be ready to support greater use by the Secretary-General of his powers under Article 99 to bring threats to the peace to the Security Council's attention; and we must act quickly and effectively in response, because prevention is better than cure. We should look to work more closely with regional organisations, as we are doing with the African Union in Darfur. We need more discussion on the criteria for when the international community might have to intervene with military force in the most extreme circumstances. And we must get better at engaging for the long term in countries recovering from conflict, co-ordinating our efforts in response to locally-agreed priorities.

Mr President,

My third point is the urgent need to combat global terrorism – a menace directed at all of us.

If we have learnt anything in the three years since 11 September 2001 it is that international terrorism is indiscriminate in its targets, and merciless in its hatred. Christian, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim, people of no religion or any religion, and of every or no shade of political opinion – all have died through the terrorists' bullet or bomb.

Today, in Iraq, we are seeing again the depths which the terrorists plumb. Of course, the vast majority of the victims of terrorism in Iraq are Iraqis – and our thoughts and condolences are with the Government and people of Iraq, and with their families. But some are foreigners who are helping Iraqis to build a more stable and prosperous country. One is Ken Bigley, a British engineer, held hostage by terrorists who have barbarically murdered his two American comrades. Our thoughts and prayers are with their families; and we continue to do all we can to secure Mr Bigley's release.

Yes, I know – how could I forget – that opinions have differed over the rightness of the military action taken in Iraq 18 months ago. But I warrant that no nation is in favour of the terrorist insurgency now occurring there. For we all recognise that what is being attempted by the terrorists in Iraq is an attack both on the Iraqi people and on everything for which this organisation stands: safety, security, human rights. We must come together to defeat the terrorists and their despicable aims.

Mr President,

The threat of terrorism confronts democratic, properly-functioning states with an acute dilemma: to fight those who recognise none of the values for which we stand, while remaining true to those values.

Our commitments under international conventions express many of those values and the importance which we attach to them. But equally, those Conventions cannot be allowed to shelter those involved in terrorism. They were designed to protect citizens from abuse by states, not by terrorists.

The 1951 Convention on Refugees protects those with a well-founded fear of persecution. I am proud that Britain and so many other nations have offered that protection where it was required. But as the 1951 Convention itself sets out, asylum is not an unqualified right: it does not apply to anyone who has committed a war crime, a crime against humanity, or other serious crime, or who is guilty of acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

We must never stoop to the level of the terrorist: to torture, mistreatment, unjustified incarceration, and nor will any country in the EU be party to the return of suspects to such conditions or to face the death penalty. But we cannot let terrorists exploit a protection designed for the persecuted, not the persecutors. We shall therefore be

working closely with Russia on its important draft Security Council Resolution, to see how best we can prevent those who commit, support and finance terrorism from sheltering behind a refugee status to which they are not entitled, and to look at ways to ensure the speedier extradition of such individuals.

Mr President,

We, the United Nations, have over the last year begun to show a new determination to come together and make collective action work.

A year from now, we will meet again here to review the High-Level Panel's recommendations and the Millennium Development Goals, and to set the UN's agenda for the next decade. The coming year, as we prepare for that Summit, will be vital for building consensus, understanding, and resolve.

The UK's Chairmanship of the G8 next year will focus on tackling climate change; and on Africa, on which the independent Commission for Africa will be producing recommendations for how best we can support the radical agenda for change and development designed by Africa itself through NEPAD and the African Union. And our Presidency of the European Union will help us to lead efforts for a successful outcome in the Doha Development Round, and for building the EU's crisis-management capabilities.

Mr President,

More than ever, global security is our shared responsibility. In the year ahead, as we continue to adapt to today's threats and challenges, we must find renewed determination and political will to make collective security work. The United Kingdom is determined to play its full part in that.

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