

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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REMARKS AT CEREMONY MARKING THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF UNITED NATIONS PEACEKEEPERS

New York, 31 May 2006

Thank you, Jean-Marie.
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

We have gathered to commemorate the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers, and to pay tribute to colleagues and friends who have made the ultimate sacrifice while serving the cause of peace.

As we are all painfully aware, more peacekeepers died in 2005 than in any other year in the past decade. So far this year, a further 33 have had their lives cut tragically short, including eight Guatemalan soldiers in a particularly brutal attack in January in the troubled eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and a Nepalese soldier just three days ago, also in the DRC. Even as we gather here, another seven Nepalese soldiers are being detained in the DRC. MONUC is doing everything possible to ensure the speedy and unconditional release of these men. I know you join me in praying for their safety. And let me stress that those who commit such acts against peacekeepers must be held accountable.

The medals we bestow today on our fallen comrades can do little to replace their presence, their good deeds, their knowledge and bonhomie, the love they showered on family and friends. But they do place on record our everlasting gratitude for the contributions these UN heroes made to our global mission of peace.

When I think back to my own first contacts with peacekeeping – some 30 years ago, when I was stationed in Ismailia as part of UNEF II – it is remarkable to see how much peacekeeping has evolved. I am sure many of you feel the same way. We are all aware that the days of lightly armed peacekeepers conducting foot patrols along ceasefire lines between sovereign States are long over.

Our operations are increasingly complex and multi-dimensional. Change remains the order of the day. In the past year alone, UN police have taken on a much higher profile, to help maintain order in post-conflict settings. And Member States established a new Peacebuilding Commission, to help ensure that peacekeepers do not have to return to places that have lapsed back into conflict.

But even as peacekeeping evolves, some things remain constant. Its unique legitimacy and universality. The dedication of its practitioners, up and down the ranks. And the teamwork among men and women of many nations.

More than 100 member states now contribute uniformed personnel, including a 71-nation mission in Sudan that is the most diverse coalition ever assembled. These brave individuals, and their

civilian counterparts, journey into harsh and often harmful situations to help millions of those driven from their homes to return in dignity and safety; to enable the disempowered to gain control of their political destiny through democratic elections; to promote respect for human rights; and to create conditions for a return to normal economic activity and a more hopeful future.

Many have given their lives so that others can live more fully, free from want and free from fear. While every fallen hero leaves behind an army of mourners, so too do they put in place a legacy of which their families, friends and fellow national and global citizens can remain forever proud. And we remain forever in their debt.

Thank you very much. I would ask that you now stand and join me in a moment of silence in honour of the fallen.

