UNITED NATIONS

In commemoration of those who risk
– and sacrifice –
their lives to save others

Address by Gary Lewis
UN Resident Coordinator in Iran
for
World Humanitarian Day
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Salaam va Sobh beh kheyr.

Excellencies,

Distinguished participants,

Khanom-ha va Aghoyan,

I start my remarks today with a quotation.

“Dear Colleagues and Friends,

This is a time of almost unbearable sadness.

Our United Nations family has been the victim of an attack so brutal and barbaric we are still struggling to take it in. We are reeling from the loss…”

- These words were spoken – over 11 years ago – on 3rd September 2003 – by the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.
- He was referring to the fact that, a few days earlier, our Headquarters in Baghdad had been attacked by a suicide truck bomb.

[SHOW PICTURE OF UN BUILDING IN IRAQ]

- I remember when I first heard these words.
- I was then serving as a UN drug control officer in South Africa.
- A few days earlier, someone had rushed up to me and said: “Gary, have you heard? Our people have been attacked in Iraq. Sergio is among the dead.”
- I had known Sergio Viera de Mello – the now-murdered Head of the UN Mission in Iraq – from when I had served in Afghanistan.
• Sergio – a Brazilian – was a man of immense charm, talent and ability – he took these characteristics and harnessed them into real action for humanity.
• But when he died, he did not do so alone.
• 21 others would die with him that day.
• Most of the fallen were UN workers.

• When Al-Qaeda attacked us in Baghdad on that clear blue day, the UN was a soft target.
• And we remain, yet, vulnerable.
• Nonetheless, since that time, the world community has consecrated the 19th of August and commemorate it – as we do so tomorrow – as World Humanitarian Day.
• We use this day to praise the tireless efforts of our humanitarian workers.
• We do this for ALL humanitarian workers, not just those who are working under the blue flag of the UN.

[SHOW PICTURE OF BATTERED UN FLAG]

• Many of us don’t know the story of this flag you see onscreen now – or the faces of the people who died in 2003.
• So, before I speak the next few lines, I will ask you to allow me to take a minute and give you a glimpse of what these UN workers looked like...
• ...Looked like to those who knew and loved them when they departed this life in 2003.

[SCREEN PPT ROLLING SEQUENCE OF FACES – TAKES 1 MINUTE]

• The long list of some of the dead from the Canal Hotel bombing is now complete and our gaze has come to rest upon one face.
• It is the face of an Iranian man – cut down in the prime of his life.
• He was our UN colleague.
• His name was Reza Hosseini – a man from Mashhad.
• He joined us in 1993 as a Senior Repatriation Assistant for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Iran.
• Reza would work with us ten more years – first in West Timor, then in East Timor, then finally – and fatefuly – in Iraq, where he was murdered along with all the others by an assassin’s bomb.
• Colleagues who wrote – and spoke – about him after his death, all say that Reza represented the true spirit of humanitarianism.

[RETURN TO PICTURE OF BATTERED UN FLAG]

• And, as I look around this room today, I am reassured to see the faces some of those from the humanitarian community – the faces of brave men and women – people who are prepared to face down danger – and to meet, and resist, adversity – and to do this in many corners of the world.
• Some work with the UN.
• Some work with international humanitarian agencies.
• Some work with Iranian agencies.
• Indeed, the UN has watched with gratitude as the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) has become active in many emergencies beyond Iran’s borders – emergencies like those in China, Pakistan, Haiti, Somalia, Turkey and many countries in Central Asia.
• We encourage Iran to continue – and even increase – the sharing of this expertise – on a regional basis – for countries which need Iran’s help.

• The UN is also greatly encouraged today by the fact that Iran’s Deputy Foreign Minister. Mr. Abbas Araghchi, has taken time from his other major preoccupation – which seeks a successful outcome to the nuclear talks – and which is rightly at the centre of attention at the moment – to commemorate this important day with us.
• For, Ladies and Gentlemen, since 2003, dozens of aid workers have been killed while doing their duties.
• In 2013, over 150 were killed.
• Recently, in South Sudan, six more UN humanitarian workers were killed.

• Since July, 30 aid workers have been killed in Gaza alone.
• 11 of these fallen worked for the UN.
• What were they humanitarians doing?
  o Trying to take care of civilian casualties.
  o Trying to support the hospitals and schools.
  o They are trying to help people who are running from one place to another – being displaced – not knowing where they can find safe shelter.
  o And the UN is trying to coordinate the provision of psychosocial support.
  o Trying to collect information on who is dead.
  o Trying to find the remnants of explosive devices that are still lying around in the rubble and in people’s homes.
  o Trying to coordinate emergency relief.
  o And doing all this even as the bombs continued to fall.

• Kofi Annan’s words – spoken in 2003 – are just as applicable today – in 2014.

• We have to ask the question: what drives these heroes?
• I believe the simple answer is that they want to help those who have been affected by either natural disasters or complex emergencies.
• They do this because the impulse to go to the aid of those who are in need – or in harm’s way – is a basic human instinct.
• One of the world’s holy scriptures says this in describing selflessness...
• “Greater love hath no man than this – than that he should lay down his life for a friend.”
• How much greater the love, then, that a humanitarian worker should lay down her life for someone she does not know at all?

• Ladies and Gentlemen,
• The flag you see onscreen hangs in the UN building in New York today.
• It fell along with our staff, but was pulled from the ruins of our UN building in Baghdad 11 years ago.
• And now you also know its story.
• This is the reason why this flag should be important – not just tomorrow – the 19th of August – but on all days.

• This is why it is important to us in the United Nations.
• With your permission, therefore, we will leave it onscreen during the statement of Ms. Valerie Amos.
• We do this as a silent tribute to ask that tomorrow – 19 August – always be remembered.
• For Reza Hosseini – and for all those – who have paid the ultimate price for their heroism.

*Kheily motashakeram.*