



Speech by Mr. Ross Mountain
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On the occasion of the commemoration of the

First Anniversary of the Baghdad Tragedy
Amman, Jordan

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One year ago today the UN faced its darkest hour ever.

Sadly, this was not the first time that UN workers have lost their lives – or have been murdered. Even more sadly this will not be the last. Yet, the Canal Hotel bombing was unique in a number of ways including its savagery (22 killed, more than 150 injured) and its circumstances. The UN had been deliberately and massively targeted.

Despite the very special and uncomfortable environment of occupation in which the Organisation was obliged to operate, it is our understanding that the UN was not a chance target - or that we were hit out of ignorance of our goals. Indeed it appears that it was the very ideals for which the Organisation stands that attracted attention:

- Working to promote human rights, stability and the return of sovereignty to the Iraq people.
- Helping provide basic needs and services to those in need, and;

Everyone one of us has an indelible memory of the blast.

Two weeks before I was completing a visit to Iraq in connection with my previous assignment to consult with Sergio and other colleagues – including many of those whose contributions we are recalling today – on the likely evolution of humanitarian needs. While in Baghdad the first humanitarian casualty occurred – an IOM staffer – then a worker of the ICRC, was shot and killed.

On 19 August I was in Monrovia, Liberia, and as is usual in such situations, endeavoring to persuade hostile parties to grant access to civilians caught in the crossfire - armed only with our blue flag.

As we know, it is always civilians – non combatant children and women in particular, that pay the greatest price in any conflict. The world of those who take on humanitarian work in conflict zones is not large. We may work for different organisations – the UN, NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, government programmes, but there is a considerable camaraderie.

In Liberia our first reaction was of course shock and profound grief, but closely followed by incredulity – how could such a thing happen? Those of us working in such areas despite occasional – usually random – casualties, had believed that our commitment to providing humanitarian help to those in need, irrespective of political, military or ethnic considerations, should, with dialogue with all parties and judicious precautions, ensure our protection.

Even after the blast – as we watched the nightmare unfold on satellite television - many of us could not conceive that our friends would not come out alive -wounded perhaps, but alive. One-hundred and fifty people came out physically and psychologically wounded - many very severely - some of whom

have still not recovered. Twenty-two of our friends – members of our enlarged family -succumbed to their horrific injuries. So many of them amongst the best and the brightest the UN, and the humanitarian community, had to offer. The blast also shattered any innocence we may have had. Institutionally it was a watershed. The UN had been a deliberate target. It might well be again. Indeed while this has special relevance for Iraq, and to an extent Afghanistan, in this age of globalisation the concern had been raised that this could happen elsewhere. This perception has seriously affected the way we now operate in crisis zones around the globe, not only Iraq.

As you are aware, after further attempts to attack the Canal Hotel and the offices of the ICRC, the Secretary-General decided to move out virtually all international staff that were working in Iraq (in humanitarian and reconstruction programmes), most at least initially moved to Jordan, others to Cyprus and Kuwait. But the UN never left Iraq. Hundreds of our national colleagues continued to work on projects in support of the Iraqi people. Indeed, nine of our Iraqi colleagues died on 19 August and scores suffered physical and psychological wounds - I want to especially welcome the presence of the family members of those who perished with us here today.

The return to Baghdad last week, of an international presence led by Mr. Ashaf Qazi, the new SRSG, with a team of 30 international staff is an important development for the United Nations. It is also an especially appropriate time to express our appreciation to our Iraqi staff for their dedication and commitment. With sovereignty returned a new Interim Government in place, Iraq is starting to rebuild its society amid the continuing insecurity and the legacy of almost three-decades of oppressive rule.

Its major asset – more than oil – is the solid base of talent Iraq can tap inside and outside the country.

Following consultations with the IIG the UN Security Council has given the UN a major and challenging role in supporting the rebuilding of Iraq – “As circumstances permit” :

- The political process (National Conference – and constitutional development);
- Organisation of elections;
- Support for reconstruction and humanitarian activities;
- Promotion of human rights and the rule of law.

For the time being the bulk of international staff will be based outside Iraq – notably in Jordan, but also in Kuwait and Cyprus.

This occasion, Mr. Minister, gives me the opportunity to publicly express through you, the deep appreciation to His Majesty the King, and His Government for their outstanding support, which you continue to extend to the UN Iraq Team, in exile, here in Amman. The generous assistance Jordan also extends to Iraq and Iraqis, as a good neighbour, is another reason why we consider ourselves fortunate to be based here.

Today, I would also like to look back to last year and recall the extraordinary assistance, and welcome Jordan, through the Government and crisis Management Centre, made available to the victims of the Canal Hotel – the dead, the wounded, their families, my colleagues. You could not have done more, let me thank in particular the armed forces, the Royal Medical Corps, the Al-Hussain Medical Centre, the Royal Jordanian Air Force, Directorate of Security, and the many others who provided support.

I and my Iraq colleagues also owe a deep debt of gratitude to Christine McNab, UN Resident Coordinator, and her Team, who compassionately and effectively dealt with the burden of this enormous influx.

Today, amid the sorrow and reflection, let us remember that as great as our loss has been, it is the Iraqi people themselves who continue to suffer the brunt of the ongoing hostilities with hundreds losing their lives and livelihoods each week. We should also spare a thought for the other colleagues who lost their lives working in other dangerous areas – Congo, Angola, Burundi, Sudan, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Afghanistan – to name but a few.

On 19 August last year we may have lost our innocence but we have not lost our ideals or forgotten the commitment our colleagues and friends made to the Iraqi people to provide hope.