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Secretary-General, observing international day of United Nations peacekeepers, lauds growing confidence in organization's ability to restore stability

He Pays Tribute to 'Selfless, Tireless, Fearless' Heroes, Fallen While Serving Cause of Peace in Lands Far from Their Own Homes

Following is the text of the message by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers, to be observed on 29 May 2006:

When the United Nations Security Council established the first peacekeeping mission on this date in 1948, few in the Council chamber could have imagined how far UN peacekeeping would evolve since that time. The days of lightly armed peacekeepers conducting foot patrols along ceasefire lines between sovereign States are long over. UN peacekeeping operations are now increasingly complex and multi-dimensional, going beyond monitoring a ceasefire to actually bringing failed States back to life, often after decades of conflict. The blue helmets and their civilian colleagues work together to organize elections, enact police and judicial reform, promote and protect human rights, conduct mine-clearance, advance gender equality, achieve the voluntary disarmament of former combatants, and support the return of refugees and displaced people to their homes. In the past year in particular, UN police have taken on an increasingly vital role, filling the gap between the role of UN military forces and local security institutions that are unable to fully maintain public order in often tense post-conflict environments.

This invaluable work does not come without risk. More peacekeepers died in the service of the United Nations in 2005 than in any other year in the past decade, with 124 peacekeepers from 46 countries losing their lives to violence, disease and accidents. A further 32 have fallen in the line of duty so far in 2006, including eight Guatemalan soldiers who died while striving to bring peace to the troubled eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Moreover, the number of peacekeepers exposed to risk has increased exponentially, and continues to grow. More than 72,000 uniformed personnel and 15,000 civilians now serve in 18 peace operations administered by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, making the United Nations the largest multilateral contributor to post-conflict stabilization worldwide.

The demand for UN peacekeeping reflects growing confidence in the Organization's ability to calm tensions and restore stability. This, in turn, is being matched by support from Member States. One hundred and eight countries now contribute uniformed personnel, including a 71-nation mission in Sudan – the most diverse coalition ever assembled. The leading contributors, by far, are India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, which collectively provide more than 40 per cent of UN peacekeepers – and as a result have also suffered some of the highest losses.

With peacekeeping having become a core function of the Organization, and with a greater number of staff joining the many already serving in dangerous field locations, it is essential that they receive more professional and responsive institutional support. We are determined to achieve this through critical management and oversight reforms, and through strict enforcement of the highest standards of conduct and of the zero tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse. We are also asking Member States and troop contributors to match our resolve on this critical issue.

The establishment of Peacebuilding Commission is another important step forward. Through sustained attention to the unique challenges of post-conflict transitions, the Commission will aim to prevent countries from lapsing back into conflict – something we have seen too often, and which has required UN peacekeepers to return to countries where peace did not take hold.

On this International Day of UN Peacekeepers, let us pay tribute to the men and women from countries across the world who serve selflessly, tirelessly and fearlessly in UN peacekeeping operations. Let us remember the heroes who have laid down their lives in lands far from their own in the service of peace. And let us reaffirm our commitment to building a world free from the scourge of war.

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