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Plenary

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Address to the 61st session of the United Nations General Assembly

**HE the Hon Alexander Downer MP
Minister for Foreign Affairs of Australia**

(Check against delivery)

Madam President

I join my colleagues in congratulating you on your election as President of the 61st General Assembly. I am also delighted to welcome Montenegro as the 192nd member of the United Nations.

I note that this will be the ninth and final General Assembly for the Secretary-General. I congratulate him on his important contribution to the United Nations over his term and throughout his UN career.

He has been a determined advocate for peace, development and UN reform and I wish him well for the future.

Madam President

Earlier this month, on the day before the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks against the United States, a man called Hakim Taniwal was murdered by a suicide bomber in Afghanistan.

Mr Taniwal was the Governor of Paktia province in Eastern Afghanistan. He was a scholarly, gently-spoken man of integrity - a good man, with a reputation as a highly capable administrator. As well as an Afghani, Mr Taniwal was an Australian. He lived in exile in my country for some years, and built a new life for his family.

But when Afghanistan was liberated from the Taliban in the wake of 9/11, Mr Taniwal returned to help rebuild his homeland. He worked for the betterment of his fellow Afghanis by adopting a forward-looking model of public administration, far removed from the Taliban narrative of rule by fear.

For his trouble, the Taliban had him killed. His nephew died alongside him. A few days later, compounding atrocity upon atrocity, a second suicide bomber attacked Mr Taniwal's funeral ceremony, killing and injuring many more people.

The task of rebuilding Afghanistan, in the face of these atrocities, is demanding great sacrifice by tens of thousands of brave men and women. It is a country in which many of the great challenges of our

time intersect: how to free its cities, towns and villages from the daily threat of violence; how to ensure an extremist ideology never again subjugates the country's institutions; and how to create the conditions for stability and good governance so necessary to economic renewal and so crucial if its people are to escape poverty and oppression.

Afghanistan represents a fundamental test for each of us. If we are not resolute and steadfast in supporting Afghanistan against the scourge of terrorism, if we are not prepared collectively to stand up against the extremists, we will deliver to the coming generations a weaker international system and a far less secure and stable world.

Iraq is another of the front-lines in this battle. I acknowledge here the divided views of UN member states over military action against the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Yet, today, there is a very clear choice that should unite us all.

The extremists have chosen to make Iraq a battleground – Osama bin Laden has said that Iraq is “for you or for us to win”. We know what will come of Iraq if it is won by the extremists. As in Afghanistan, we must all commit to securing its future. Iraq is not America's burden alone and Afghanistan is not NATO's burden alone, because if terrorism prevailed, the consequences would be catastrophic for each of us, wherever we may live.

This struggle will be protracted. Our challenge is not just to keep our citizens safe from terrorist attack, it is also to defeat an ideology that allows for no ideas or belief systems other than its own.

It is imperative we see this ideology clearly for what it is – a mindset every bit as brutal and uncompromising as its totalitarian predecessors in centuries past. It is an ideology that directly challenges the principles and values of modernity – the flourishing of open markets, open societies, open minds. To defeat this evil, we must harness the collective strength of the international community.

I welcome recent agreement on the UN global strategy to counter terrorism, but am disappointed that the strategy's illustrative list of conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism did not include extremist ideologies.

And we need to do much more. States should conclude a comprehensive convention on international terrorism. This would demonstrate an unambiguous commitment, ensuring all terrorist acts are criminalised in international law. It is disappointing that the UN still cannot agree on the scope of such a convention.

More disturbingly, some countries continue to sponsor terrorist groups to promote their own political agendas. In the Middle East, it is essential that all countries, including Iran and Syria, use their influence over organisations such as Hezbollah to stop terrorist assaults,

including those directed at the state of Israel. Any viable resolution of the conflict must include Hezbollah's disarmament, its renunciation of violence and a recognition of Israel's right to exist in peace.

In all of this, the United Nations has a role to play. But as I have said in this place before, the United Nations is not the answer to all the problems of the world. And where the United Nations can't act, individual states must. Our membership of the United Nations does not absolve each of us from the responsibility to show leadership and to pursue practical solutions.

Too often in the world of politics, the temptation is for governments to strike an attitude and then leave the substantive action for another day, or offload the responsibility onto others.

We can make solemn pledges - as we should and do - to work much harder to assist developing nations confront the ravages of poverty and disease. We can sign high-minded manifestos to protect our environment from the risks of climate change. Alongside global security, these are two issues crucial to our collective future. But so much of the talk is mere artifice unless backed up by resolute, practical and well-constructed policy responses.

Madam President

In Australia's region, practical and effective cooperation has exemplified the counter-terrorism response. A regional training centre jointly established by Australia and Indonesia is helping South-East Asian law enforcement agencies develop the capabilities they need to destroy terrorist networks. Other recent initiatives, such as interfaith dialogues, are promoting tolerance and mutual understanding.

Madam President

Practical and effective cooperation has also been the hallmark of our commitment to East Timor - Australian Defence Force personnel and police worked with counterparts from New Zealand, Malaysia and Portugal to restore order after the April riots. We remain ready to continue to provide a significant "green helmet" military contingent in East Timor to complement the UN police force mandated under Security Council Resolution 1704.

Elsewhere in our region, Australia has joined in a partnership with 14 other Pacific countries in a Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands - or RAMSI, as we call it. RAMSI is not just about restoring law and order - some 150 advisors are working with the Solomon Islands government, helping to stabilise finances, revitalise the public service and strengthen the justice and prison systems.

Madam President

None of these tasks is easy and much more remains to be done, but the hard work has begun and we are making headway.

In contrast, the tragedy of Darfur poses a grievous challenge to the international community. Darfur is a litmus test of the UN's responsibility to help people who desperately need its protection. It is a test of the most basic principles of civilisation. We all know this. We also know it is a test that, so far, the UN has failed.

Madam President

In this place last year, we assumed a solemn responsibility to protect those who have no means to protect themselves. The UN itself must now redouble its efforts to try to prevent any further bloodshed in Darfur, which has already claimed well in excess of 200,000 lives and brought about the displacement of millions more. The UN must keep its promise to the people of Darfur. It is no less than they should expect and no less than we should demand.

Madam President

The desperation of Darfur reminds us also of the immense challenges of development. Members of the United Nations have recognised this through the Millennium Development Goals.

Aid is important – and last year Australia committed itself to doubling our annual aid budget to about four billion dollars a year by 2010.

Australia has recently sharpened the focus of our development assistance program on supporting good governance, basic social services and security in developing countries. In the South Pacific, we will sponsor new programs to train people in technical and entrepreneurial skills. But increasing aid and reducing debt burdens alone will not reduce poverty.

Economic growth is central to poverty alleviation. The World Bank estimates that the number of people living on less than two dollars a day in East Asia has fallen by around 280 million between 2001 and 2005. The policies and actions of developing countries in creating an “enabling” environment for economic growth are fundamental to advances on this front.

Likewise, free and open trade and investment is pivotal. The failure of the Doha Round of multilateral trade talks would be a cruel rebuff to the world’s poor – the World Bank estimates that a strong outcome in the Round could lift an additional 32 million people out of poverty by 2015.

Madam President

We cannot underpin sustainable economic development without protecting the environment on which we depend. Biodiversity loss, land clearing, deforestation and climate change present threats to the common good that can best be met through collective action.

But collective action entails much more than adopting resolutions and signing treaties. Fine words and high aspirations may give us a sense that we are acting to stop environmental degradation, but they are of little benefit unless backed by practical action. Domestic implementation of environmental commitments has not been sufficient, and the gap between words and action remains too wide.

Climate change is an area where we must move beyond blind faith in a single multilateral approach. The great challenge is to address climate change without jeopardising economic growth, particularly in developing countries. We need to work towards a more inclusive and effective international approach on climate change.

Existing efforts aren't enough - we need to bring forward new ideas, not constrained by ideology. The focus of the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate is the development and transfer of cleaner energy-generating technologies.

This partnership brings together Australia, the United States, Japan, China, India and the Republic of Korea. Together, these countries account for about half of the world's GDP, population, energy use and greenhouse gas emissions.

The aim of the Partnership is to bring developed and developing countries together with the private sector to deploy technologies – be they renewable energy or carbon storage – to help reduce the dangers of climate change while not stalling economic growth and development.

Madam President

Effective international action on the great global challenges of our time requires more than resolutions in the United Nations. It requires the exercise of strong leadership by individual nations. It requires pro-active policy, not political posturing and personal abuse from this podium. It requires a rigorous search for sound and practical long-term solutions.

As members of the United Nations, we have pledged to “unite our strength to maintain international peace and security”. But equally, we cannot abrogate to the United Nations the responsibility we have as individual nation states for security and good governance within our borders and within our regions. History will judge us poorly if we do not meet those responsibilities.