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SECRETARY-GENERAL SAYS WORLD AT CROSSROADS BETWEEN HORRORS,

HOPE OF 20TH CENTURY, IN ADDRESS TO WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

Following is Secretary-General Kofi Annan's address to the closing plenary of the World Economic Forum, entitled "Visions for a Shared Future", delivered on the shores of the Dead Sea, Jordan, 23 June:

At this place and this time we must feel ourselves at a crossroads of history.

In this place, thousands of years ago, great cities flourished, and perished. The very stones speak to us of the rise and fall of empires.

This region gave birth to the three great monotheistic religions. It has seen some of mankind's greatest achievements – but it has also seen, in age after age, "man's inhumanity to man".

In the last few decades, especially, this cradle of civilisation has become a crucible of bitter conflict, which has aroused the passions of the whole world. And it has lagged behind in some of the great advances of the modern age – in material and technical progress, but also, even more sadly, in the development of knowledge and human freedom.

The last three years have been especially violent and tragic. We have seen great suffering inflicted on Arabs and on Israelis – much of it on innocent civilians. And alas, there is all too likely to be yet more violence ahead.

When I say that Arabs have suffered, I think not only of Palestinians. I think also of Iraqis. They have suffered terribly from conflict, sanctions and unspeakable human rights abuses.

They continue to suffer now.

Let us all pledge to make sure that they now have a real opportunity to put their painful past behind them – to determine their own political future and control their own natural resources, as they have the unquestionable right to do.

As the Security Council has resolved, "the day when Iraqis govern themselves must come quickly". If we succeed in enabling them to do that, this great nation will be able to look back on 2003 as a positive turning point in its history.

And the same could be true for Israelis and Palestinians.

This very month, not far from here, their two prime ministers pledged to follow the [Road Map](#) to peace drawn up for them by the Quartet. They must not let themselves be deflected by acts of violence. The international community, following the strong lead given by President Bush, must help them, and hold them to their commitments.

The presence here of so many international leaders, from business and civil society as well as politics, is in itself an eloquent token of support – a vote of confidence in the region's future, and an encouragement to those who are working for a just, lasting, comprehensive peace.

But when I say we are at a crossroads of history, I am not thinking only of this region. I am thinking of the whole world.

We are at the beginning of a new century, and we don't yet know what it will be like.

As we look back at the last century, we can see two models.

There is the model of the first half, when almost the entire planet was devastated by two world wars, and freedom everywhere was threatened by the rise of totalitarianism.

Horror was heaped on horror, until we reached the Holocaust and Hiroshima. Had things gone on like that, our lives now would be bleak indeed.

And there is the model of the second half – which was not perfect, by any means, but was still a vast improvement.

Yes, there were atrocities, including even renewed genocide.

Yes, there were many brutal wars. This region had more than its share.

Yes, there were appalling violations of human rights.

And yes, there was the Cold War, with its precarious balance of nuclear terror. All humanity could have perished, at almost any moment, from a single miscalculation by the leaders of one of the superpowers.

But, thank God, that did not happen. And there is much else to be thankful for, besides. Overall, the second half of the twentieth century saw some incredible progress.

The world economy not only recovered from the devastation of 1945. It expanded as never before.

There were amazing technical changes. People in the industrialised world today enjoy a level of prosperity, and have access to a range of experiences, that our grandparents could not have dreamed of.

Of course, much of the developing world lags far behind. Billions of people still live in extreme and degrading poverty.

But even there, there was much good news. With improvements in education and primary health care, child mortality was reduced. Literacy spread.

The peoples of the developing world threw off the yoke of colonialism, and those of the Soviet bloc won political freedom. Democracy is not yet universal, but it is now more the norm than the exception.

Did all this happen by accident?

No! It happened because, in and after 1945, a group of far-sighted leaders were determined to make the second half of the twentieth century different from the first.

They saw that the human race had only one world to live in, and that unless it managed its affairs more prudently, all human beings would suffer. Indeed, all might perish.

So they drew up rules to govern international behaviour, and they founded a network of institutions in which different nations could co-operate for the common good: global institutions and regional ones, technical ones and political ones, with the United Nations at the centre to bring all nations together and keep the peace between them.

Between them, these institutions made it possible for a growing proportion of the human race to live in freedom and prosperity.

It was a world in which people of different nations and cultures came to look on each other, not as subjects of fear and suspicion, but as potential partners, able to exchange goods and ideas to their mutual benefit.

It was a world of increasing openness and freedom; of growing mutual confidence; above all, a world of hope. It was a world in which parents on every continent could believe that their children's lives would be better than their own.

The question now is, will the twenty-first century be like the first half of the twentieth, or like the second?

If it is like the first, it will be even more violent, more intolerant, and more destructive. States and societies will close in on themselves, stamping out diversity, restricting human rights, and refusing to accept products or people, or ideas, that come from other cultures.

New technologies, instead of improving people's lives, will make the effects of bad decisions even worse. The planet will be laid waste, and those who survive will view each other with fear and suspicion.

But that is not my "vision for a shared future". I see a different future – one that we have the power to choose.

I see humanity building on the achievements of the second half of the 20th century, adapting them, and carrying them much further.

I see human beings caring for each other, and states sharing responsibility for the safety and welfare of all people, wherever they may live.

Each state will look after its own people first. But where there is need, others will come to help. Idealism will not be scoffed at as naïve, but respected and taken seriously.

I see markets that are truly free and fair. The poor will be able to improve their lot by producing and selling, without facing trade barriers or unfairly subsidised competition.

I see all peoples working together to care for their common home, the earth, ensuring that its riches are preserved for future generations.

And I see decisions that affect the global interest being taken in global institutions, starting with the United Nations. All members will respect each other's views, and strive honestly to reach agreement.

They will recognise the need for change – including change in our institutions – when new challenges require new responses. But they will judge the value of change by the improvements it can bring in security and freedom, justice and prosperity for all.

Last year, when I addressed this Forum in New York, I said that we had entered the new millennium through a gate of fire – referring, of course, to the terrorist attack on that city in September 2001.

That attack was indeed a challenge. It challenged us to unite against common enemies, and defeat them. But, even more fundamentally, it was a challenge to our common humanity; to our belief that diversity is a source of wealth and inspiration, and not of fear.

It challenged us to understand each other better, and to join hands across cultural and religious barriers. It challenged us to show generosity and vision; to make sacrifices for the sake of peace; to take responsibility for the fate of our fellow men and women.

My friends, let us pledge ourselves to meet that challenge. The gate of fire need not lead into a waste land. Let our children look back on this time, and say that here, by the shores of the Dead Sea, we entered a living land – a land of hope.

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