

Mr. Secretary General

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Five years ago, on 19 August, it was just after 4.30 p.m

Some of us were in our offices working, more than two hours lay ahead until the end of the working day

Some of our local colleagues were getting ready to tidy away their papers, lock up their offices and go back home

A sound of a deafening boom came, accompanied by a terrifying blast

Glass started flying in all directions

Ceilings and parts of ceilings fell on people's heads

The building rocked violently

Because of the dust from the blast and the heat from the fires that had broken out, it was impossible to see anything

All this and more happened in an instant

Many of us fell down; some never got up again

Blood was pouring from many of us

Some were amazed to be still in one piece; incredulous to be still breathing

The storm abated, but the smell of blood, mingled with the dust from the building, the heat of air temperature, at over 50 degrees, and the heat from the burning fires formed a strange, incredible mixture

We ran for the corridors and staircases that were on the verge of collapse

They were littered with debris and glass, and spattered with colleagues' blood

We headed for what used to be the main entrance of the building

Bodies of some of our colleagues were there, covered with a thick layer of dust

People were bleeding and crying out for help or running around in a daze trying to save anyone still buried beneath the rubble

They dug through the mounds of rubble and earth with their bare hands

To us, those few long hours that afternoon seemed like an eternity

By the end of the day, some of us had returned to where we ought to be, others never did

Some people opened their eyes to find themselves in a hospital in Baghdad or the suburbs

Others found themselves in hospitals in neighbouring countries or even further afield

Little did they realize the enormity of what was happening, the severity of their injuries, the length of the path to recovery that lay before them - a path that, for some, would take years to complete

Iraqi colleagues went back to their families, depressed and stunned by what had happened, fearful about what lay ahead in the coming days

Some of us returned to our modest hotels, dazed with sadness, waiting for those who would rejoin the usual crowd...and for those who never will .

In those hotels, we lived as one big cohesive happy family

We shared everything, accommodation, food, work and transport

The bonds of affection between us were strong

We had grown close to one another and barriers and differences had dissolved, turning us into one united family

We none of us spared any effort to carry out our allotted tasks, tasks which, when taken together, were later to be described as "Mission Impossible", given the lack of a clear vision about the exact role of the United Nations and the extremely complex situation in a country with ancient roots and a long history like Iraq

Until that day, most of us had had no idea of just how dangerous our mission really was

We realized that the flag raised over the United Nations building, and which was still there after the explosion, was not enough to protect us

We realized that this flag had enemies as well as friends and that the objective had been to silence us, to break our will and to stop our work

How can I describe the pain that we felt when we went into the rooms of friends who had been there yesterday and left us to another world today ? we were trying to gather together their personal belongings, keep them and make sure that they got to their families and loved ones

In those moments, words and tears failed us.

How can I describe the sense of loss, grief and anger when we entered the room belonging to Reeham, who had not even had time to unpack her luggage , she had arrived only yesterday and now/ today she was gone and Ronny, Fiona, Rick, Nadia, Sergio, Jean Salim, and ... and ... ?

We touched their clothes, their personal effects, their perfume, their books, their papers, their photographs, their music, the little things that had meant so much to them- now left behind, orphaned, in their deserted rooms

Those of us still in good physical shape were at our lowest ebb psychologically

We waited for days for clear instructions or advice from our organization, which seemed to be more stunned than we were and unable to advise us

Many of us left Iraq

Some returned to their original place of work, but many with employment contracts only for Iraq had no chance to catch their breath and allow their wounds to heal ... a struggle of a different kind began, to find a job in one of the corners of this large organization, as there were no suitable alternatives offered to absorb those who had lost their jobs after the incident

Some of us waited a long time for the warmth of a human contact, offering us reassurance; it never came

As for our Iraqi colleagues, their suffering was worse; they were completely forgotten in the midst of the tragedy

Most had lost their jobs - the only source of income for their immediate and extended families

Some were lucky enough to find work in other conflict zones like Darfur, Afghanistan, East Timor and elsewhere

Some - and they deserve our fullest gratitude - continue to battle with the difficulties and dangers, risking their lives every day as they travel from all over Baghdad into the Green Zone, where the small new United Nations headquarters is located, and refusing to give up in the face of the many threats that hang over their lives and the lives of their families

When they go out in the morning, they do not know whether or not they will be there to spend the evening with their families

They deserve the deepest gratitude of every one of us

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The blood of our 22 colleagues and friends is mingled in the soil of Baghdad, Iraq, with the blood of the dozens of Iraqi people who lose their lives each day and who are as dear to the hearts of their family, friends and colleagues as our loved ones and colleagues.

Now, five years later, we come together, finally together, to remember

To cry and laugh from the heart, to blame, to understand, to miss, to remember, to thank and to reconcile

We look and hope for a better future in such a difficult, challenging, changing world

We still believe in our organization and what it does, in spite of our bitter experience, and we strongly urge it, as we stand here today, to review its policies, rules and directives so as to provide a better and reasonable level of humanitarian protection and support to its staff still present and working in danger zones across the world.

To those who have called on us to turn this page and put the pain behind us, we say, on the contrary, we must not forget until the attempts to target the UN stop. By remembering we draw strength and the resolve to carry out the mission and noble work of our colleagues.

May our colleagues, friends, loved ones, brothers and sisters whom we have lost and are losing every day rest in peace!