

Villa Decius, Krakow

October 8, 2009

Award acceptance speech

by Ad Melkert, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq

We are living in an interconnected world with many individuals and organizations joining hands in sincere efforts to make the world a better place to live. It is therefore an extraordinary honor for the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq to see the spotlights today in receiving the Villa Decius annual award honoring “special merits in peaceful coexistence and cooperation of communities, religions and cultures”. It is a magnificent honor because of the man who gave his life to that cause and his name to this prize: our colleague and friend Sergio Vieira de Mello who six years ago was amongst tens of international and national UN staff killed or injured by the most cowardish of evil acts: to plant a bomb at the doorstep of a purely humanitarian mission.

As the third successor to Sergio I would like to thank the Award Committee for honoring the work of several thousands of women and men, Iraqi and international that came back to Baghdad and to Iraq after the initial shock and disbelief and now for over five years are cementing, brick by brick, the fundamentals under the new Iraq. They do so under the weight of body armor, life in containers and distance of families. And for our Iraqi colleagues the real risk that unwavering dedication to the future of their country leads to adverse pressure, or far worse, on them or their families. It is a particular honor also for my predecessors, Ashraf Quazi and Staffan de Mistura – dedicated and exemplary international civil servants – who, with the support of the Security Council, managed to pull the mission to a high level of effective support to Iraq and its people. The contributions by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) embody the core values and core tasks of the United Nations Charter and Organization. We are deeply grateful for the recognition of that dimension in particular that may represent the true significance of the award decision.

The Sergio Vieira de Mello Prize stands for the promotion of democracy and tolerance. This is what defines and drives our mission every day.

Right, in the final stage of a first full, remarkable term of parliament Iraqi preparations are advancing for national elections in January. For UNAMI assisting Iraq in organizing and step by step strengthening democracy is our daily bread and butter. Let’s not underestimate the magnitude of the task. Whilst there is no doubt that the great majority of Iraqis genuinely vie for a democratic future, three decades of dictatorship as well as three wars and heavy sanctions cannot be erased altogether in just a few years.

Advocating for tolerance means bringing together people of different communities, sects and religions. Very often we hear from ordinary citizens: we would not have a problem if not for the strive for political and economic power

by our leaders and by international players. The foundation for tolerance must be supported by the promotion and dissemination of core values that are universal, at the heart of the universal mission of the UN. A climate conducive for tolerance requires back-up through political compromise: within the country, between Arabs and Kurds; and within the region, in particular between Iraq and Kuwait. And sustaining over time a shared belief in a common future requires investing in a strong economy and a fair delivery of social services and support: education, health, housing, jobs – like everywhere in the world, but pertinent in a country under recovery and reconstruction with so many young people wanting to seize the opportunity of a new era. It also requires handling the common natural resources, in particular oil, in a way that really serves the common interest.

In many regards the UN in Iraq is in a central position, with all our efforts directed to build and maintain trust. Government and society, partners and donors and the Security Council are at the origin and destination of these efforts that offer a unique opportunity to bring into practice the fundamental principles that unite all nations. This is the key driver for all staff working tirelessly in and from Baghdad, Erbil, Amman and Kuwait; national and international; civil and military; policy and logistic support; political Mission and Country Team: together.

To be sure, the uniqueness applies to the situation in Iraq. For the engagement with the cause of peace and reconciliation is an everyday occurrence for the UN family in fifteen, twenty missions more across the globe in order to bring humanitarian support, reconstruction and development action and reconciliation initiative to the peoples that need the presence of their own organization. That is why I trust you will agree with me that the Sergio Prize is a tribute to all UN staff wherever and whenever they act as professionals and volunteers as messengers of peace and justice, democracy and tolerance. The activities of the Villa Decius foundation are indispensable to encourage and guide these messengers and their messages. Thank you very much for sharing today your leadership with a world that needs a lot more of this so as to transform our planet into a better place to live and to live common values for all.