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**Ref: Speech by the Minister for Defence, Mr. Willie O’Dea, T.D.,
at Camp Clarke, Kosovo 30th May 2005**

Chief of Staff, Secretary General, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Men and Women of the 30th Infantry Group. Firstly, may I thank Col. Michael Cleary, Lt. Col. Derry Fitzgerald and all the Irish personnel here for the extremely warm welcome afforded to all of us on this visit.

I am truly delighted to be here in Camp Clarke at last. You may recall at the Review at Cathal Brugha barracks on April 5th last that I said I would be coming to see you here in Kosovo when you had settled in on your tour of duty with KFOR.

Here I am today. I am sorry that my visit is so fleeting, I do sincerely wish I could stay here longer to meet with more of you individually, but time and pressure of work - on all of us - has conspired to deny me that opportunity on this visit.

My reasons for visiting you here are very straightforward. Firstly, and most importantly I want to thank you for all you are doing here to help stabilise and bring progress to this region. What you do here, day in and day out, is turn into reality our words of commitment to peacekeeping and to progress in the Balkans. Your work and your actions fills every Irish person with pride. Secondly, I want to see for myself, at first hand, what the situation facing our troops is like, both here and in Bosnia Herzegovina.

Since August 1999, members of the Irish Defence Forces have served as part of the KFOR mission in Kosovo. As part of a force of 17,000, drawn from 30 countries, Irish troops have played a central role over the past five years in making this UN authorised mission an extremely successful one.

I am very mindful of the great sacrifices you make here. I understand how much you all miss your homes, your families and your loved ones. I know the dangers you face and the hardships you endure as part of your mission.

The Chief of Staff, the Secretary General of the Department and I are committed to doing whatever we can to making your time here as safe and agreeable as we possibly can; so that you can concentrate fully on the work you have come here to do. I am satisfied that that all appropriate security measures are in place to ensure the safety of all Defence Forces personnel serving with KFOR

I know from my talks with President McAleese, An Taoiseach and my Ministerial colleagues that every time they travel or meet with heads of state that the great and unrivalled reputation of the Irish peacekeeper is soon mentioned. Your work and your actions here are a reflection on Ireland. I say this, not to put any greater pressure on you, but to let you know how deeply we value what you do and how enormously proud we are of you.

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While your presence here is a great source of pride to Ireland, it is the difference between life and death for so many hundreds and thousands of people living here.

You are not only their guarantee of peace and safety for today – you are their beacon of hope for tomorrow. How fitting and appropriate that a small country like Ireland; that strove for its own independence and sovereignty just a few generations ago is helping other small countries to access that freedom today.

I cannot help thinking how proud the founders of the Irish State would be of you today and of an Ireland that play its part in alleviate the suffering of innocent civilians across the globe. You, and you alone, are the proud standard bearers of their honoured title of: Óglaigh na hÉireann

There is a great tradition of Irish contingents helping and assisting with the many humanitarian needs of the local population. This is as true here in Kosovo as it is in Liberia and it was in the Lebanon and Cyprus. Over and above their normal duties, members of the various Irish contingents in Kosovo have assisted with humanitarian tasks, most notably, the reconstruction of family houses in the Lipljan area.

During this tour I understand you will be working on three local projects: 1. The Banjica primary school, where you are helping with provision of educational material. 2. Supporting the development of the Gornja Gusterica School village sports area and, 3. The construction of offices for NGOs helping those with disabilities in the Stimilje municipality

The help given to the local communities by Irish troops is something you can be very proud of. It is all the more remarkable when one considers that this work is carried out during your own time off, after your daily UN duties have been performed.

As has been the case for some time this work will receive support from the Department of Foreign Affairs through Development Co-operation Ireland. I understand they will be providing of €55,000 in funding for these projects.

It is perhaps one of the most rewarding facets of the work here which I know is greatly appreciated by the civilian population who have nothing but the height of praise for Irish soldiers.

I am glad to have had this opportunity to express my own personal appreciation and that of the Government for the incredible work you are doing here. You are the new generation of Irish Ambassadors. I salute your courage, I salute your humanity and I salute your patriotism.

I wish you all well for the rest of your tour of duty here. I want to wish you all continued safety during your time here and a safe return to your families in Ireland.

ENDS

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Thank you. Ends.