

**REMARKS BY PRESIDENT McALEESE AT THE CLOSING CEREMONY
OF THE DEFENCE FORCES CELEBRATION OF
50 YEARS OF PEACEKEEPING DUTIES, CATHAL BRUGHHA BARRACKS,
RATHMINES, DUBLIN 6**

FRIDAY, 28th NOVEMBER 2008

Dia dhíbh a chairde. Tá an áthas orm bheith i bhur measc ar on ócáid seo.

Chief of Staff, distinguished guests.

This golden jubilee of Irish peacekeeping has been celebrated in many different places and ways throughout the year but always with the same pride in those who have served in our name with the U.N. and the same sadness as we call to mind those who surrendered their lives or their health that others might know the gift of peace. Now we gather in Cathal Brugha Barracks, to officially bring our mix of celebration and commemoration to an end.

It is of course also a beginning - the start of the next fifty years and already our troops are on this very day immersed in their vocation as global peace-keepers in no less than ten fields of operation that include Lebanon, Chad, and Kosovo.

In times of poverty and in times of prosperity Ireland's fidelity to service with the United Nations has never faltered thanks entirely to the men and women of our Defence Forces who stepped up and shipped out to so many far-flung and dangerous parts of the world. There they became the bridge to peace for so many victims of conflict. They were and are the answer to prayers of despair that go up wherever the powerless are overwhelmed by violence and left to wonder whether anyone out there in the wider world cares.

In Ireland we subscribe to the view that we are after all our brothers and sisters keepers, what hurts them is our responsibility and we showcase that view in many ways, for example through the work of Irish Aid in developing countries where we invest in the education, health and good governance of millions of the world's poorest peoples. We also showcase our concern and our willingness to share responsibility for others through our peace-keeping service with the United Nations. Importantly too we also show very powerfully the challenging and unique moral vocation of a militarily neutral country, with an army that has never since its formation been deployed in the making of war.

In the early 1960's, UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, when asked, coined the term "Peacekeeping" which was not specifically mentioned in the UN Charter and he said it belonged to "Chapter Six and a Half of the Charter", meaning somewhere between negotiated peaceful resolution of conflict of chapter six and the use of force which could be sanctioned by chapter seven. For Ireland, as a neutral and non-aligned country this method of military participation has proved itself to be a worthy and invaluable channel for our armed forces to lend their considered, measured and subtle military expertise to calm, stabilise and help to pacify some of the world's most troubled regions.

Instead of making us enemies our peacekeepers have made friends for Ireland across the world. They have done that not just by doing a first class job of peace-keeping but by interesting themselves deeply in the lives of those they protected, volunteering to help in a local orphanage, bringing much needed support to a local Aids hospice, looking out for their new neighbours in ways that were well above and beyond the call of duty but within the precious realm of human decency and generosity. They also brought with them their camaraderie, their humour, their music, their faith and their capacity to be community to one another especially during those inevitable spells of loneliness and homesickness which those who serve overseas face into even as they face into all the dangers of conflict and instability. In the uncertain spaces they were called to work, they brought the certainty of reliability, of trust, of kindness and humanity. They also brought the hope of peace.

This thing we call peace, as a word is simple and innocuous sounding. As a concept it is complex beyond belief and as a process it is frustratingly painstaking and long. We in Ireland have reason to understand that better than many others for our own Peace Process was the antithesis of an overnight success. Today Irish peacekeepers are back in Lebanon, the place where we began our service with the United Nations almost exactly fifty years ago. The story of the ebb and flow of our service there underlines just how fragile peace is once it is established after years of volatility and how much nurturing it needs if it is to grow robust and enduring. Our seminal mission to the Congo began in 1960 and while we only have a handful of observers there currently, that tragic country remains an area of significant U.N operations.

It was George Bernard Shaw who noted that “Peace is not only better than war, but infinitely more arduous”, and generations of Irish peacekeepers can certainly testify to the truth of that. The words of President John F Kennedy when speaking in Dáil Éireann in 1963 have been quoted many times and they still ring true as they resonate down the years “... from Cork to the Congo from Galway to the Gaza Strip, from this legislative assembly to the United Nations, Ireland is sending its most talented men to do the work of peace.” Of course, I can now add that for well over half of those fifty years our talented women have joined their male colleagues in doing the work of peace, serving in some of the most hazardous overseas environments.

I have been privileged as President and in my Constitutional role as Commander-in-Chief, to visit our peacekeepers in a number of the countries where they have been deployed. I have seen the austerity of their lives, the absence of home comforts, the menacing environment, the ever-present dangers they learn to live with. I have seen the monuments to those who died, met the comrades and families who have been bereaved. I have been the recipient of wonderful welcomes they have so carefully planned and prepared and I have been moved time and again by their formidable love of homeland and their passion to serve it well. At home I have met their spouses and children who so graciously and generously put up with absence and loneliness so that others can know the peace of heart and mind that comes from having friends who care. I have been privileged to meet the retired veterans who wear the blue beret with righteous pride and I can say without being accused of exaggerating that all those I have met from

Cathal Brugha to Camp Shamrock, from Áras an Uachtaráin to Africa, have made me hugely proud to be President of Ireland.

Each and every one of them is entitled to the gratitude of the Irish people for their courage and commitment these past 50 years when by their efforts not alone did they bring the gift of peace to so many strangers but to their homeland they brought the gift of international respect and friendship. In this jubilee year we as a nation salute them.

Is iontach an obair ata ar siúl agaibh agus go raibh maith agaibh go léir.