

Farewell message by
UNIFIL Head of Mission and Force Commander Major General Alberta Asarta Cuevas
Transfer of Authority
28 January 2012

Honoured religious leaders,
Your excellencies, ministers, ambassadors, members of parliament,
Dear friends from the Lebanese Armed Forces and other security officials,
Respected Lebanese authorities,
Fellow United Nations representatives,
Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

A warm welcome to all of you on today's ceremony which marks the Transfer of Command of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) from myself to Major General Paolo Serra. I am greatly honoured to share this moment with you, as I bid farewell to colleagues, friends and our Lebanese partners after two years of service under the blue flag in southern Lebanon. The presence of so many distinguished guests is testimony to the important role UNIFIL has and will continue to play in bringing peace to this troubled region.

I recall that the first time I left Lebanon, after my four-month tenure as UNIFIL Sector East commander, someone told me that I would be back again. And indeed, not even a year later, I returned.

I do not know whether my tenure with UNIFIL has been for the better. That is for my Lebanese colleagues to judge. What I can say, having served as UNIFIL Head of Mission and Force Commander for two years to maintain stability in our Area of Operations so as to foster confidence between the parties, and help achieve a permanent ceasefire, the ultimate goal of security council resolution 1701 (2006). For that, I have followed the path of my predecessors. In some areas, which are key for the success of our mission, we progressed significantly. Let me briefly elaborate on these key advances before sharing with you some of my thoughts on the way ahead.

As you all know, in the wake of the 2006 war, the Security Council, in its resolution 1701 (2006), decided to significantly enhance UNIFIL's mandate and strength. This was followed by the deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces to southern Lebanon, for the first time in decades. Over the following months, UNIFIL and the Lebanese army developed an effective partnership, which, as the security council has often highlighted, is the cornerstone for successful implementation of resolution 1701 (2006).

In addition, our presence here has been characterized by the enduring bond we share with the people of south Lebanon. Over the past two years, our relationship acquired ever new forms of interaction and we made every effort to gain the understanding and support of the local population, so vital for the fulfillment of our tasks.

Furthermore, we have witnessed a significant increase in confidence-building between the two parties. This has been largely due to the comprehensive liaison and coordination arrangements put in place, particularly the tripartite forum, which have proved effective in, first, containing incidents or violations, and then engaging the parties in taking practical steps towards conflict prevention and confidence building.

One such positive outcome of these efforts has been the progress made in the visible marking of the blue line. In accordance with its mandated task to ensure that the blue line is respected by the parties in its entirety, UNIFIL began the marking process in 2007. In 2010, a "Blue Line Task Force" was established, so that -- while by the end of 2009 the construction of 38 blue barrels had been achieved -- during 2010 and 2011, 36 and 47 blue barrels were placed respectively. Today, a total of 126 blue barrels have been constructed -- or about 50 per cent of markable points. But, what is most relevant, access to 190 points has already been cleared of mines and 61 more are in the demining phase.

As concerns the issue of northern Ghajar, the deadlock was broken after, in November 2010, Israel accepted, in principle, to withdraw its forces from the area and UNIFIL submitted proposed security arrangements in 2011. I am hopeful that, with the continued determination of all parties, an Israeli withdrawal from all Lebanese territory can be effectively accomplished in the period ahead.

As concerns the overall situation in the area of operations, it has remained generally stable during the last two years. However, three terrorist attacks against UNIFIL in 2011 as well as the latest rocket launches sadly point to the presence of weapons and hostile armed elements ready to use them against our forces. I count on the continued commitment of the Lebanese authorities to ensure the safety and security of UNIFIL personnel.

Finally I have always placed high priority on improving the existing infrastructure to enhance staff morale and performance. The expansion of UNIFIL HQ to camp Green Hill and the improvement of living and working conditions for UNIFIL personnel in Naqoura and elsewhere in our AO are the most vivid examples of these efforts.

More than five years after adoption of the resolution, conditions on the ground have significantly improved, the cessation of hostilities and respect for the Blue Line have been generally upheld by the parties. UNIFIL has played, and in the period ahead, will continue to play, an important role in preventing a resumption of major hostilities and mitigating any incidents from escalating.

UNIFIL, with the continued backing of the international community and the vital support of troop-contributing countries, will remain committed to maintaining its ongoing operational activities in southern Lebanon; to advancing its current liaison and coordination arrangements with both parties; and to seeking ever closer cooperation with the Lebanese army. Together, we shall continue to do our utmost to pursue our mandated tasks.

However, the full implementation of the resolution is faced with a number of strategic challenges, many of which are outside UNIFIL's remit. The most important of them is to make progress towards a permanent ceasefire and a long-term solution to the conflict.

Indeed, UNIFIL's current deployment, assets and resources cannot be sustained indefinitely. It is the responsibility of the parties to take advantage of the window of opportunity that UNIFIL's presence has offered and transcend the current status quo to achieve a permanent ceasefire. The successful and full implementation of resolution 1701, and ultimately, the achievement of a lasting peace in the region, will depend on the steadfast commitment and joint efforts of the parties and the international community in the period ahead.

Connected to that, the Lebanese army's capacity, on land and at sea, needs to be further enhanced before it can effectively assume resolution 1701-related activities and responsibilities over the mission's area of operations. Ultimately, UNIFIL's exit strategy is linked to the Lebanese army's ability to ensure security and stability in southern Lebanon and over Lebanese territorial waters. For this, it is essential that the Lebanese government does its utmost and the international community continues to support the Lebanese army.

Indeed, all our activities at the service of peace and security in southern Lebanon could not be implemented without the cooperation of the Lebanese army. Working in close partnership with UNIFIL, it demonstrated, time and again, and despite constraints faced, its professionalism and outstanding commitment to fulfill resolution 1701. In fact, our partnership with the Lebanese army has broken new grounds through our ongoing strategic dialogue. Today, I therefore wish to particularly thank Lebanese Armed Forces commander General Kahwaji and his soldiers in recognition of their role as a key partner in performing our duties.

At the same time, I would also like to express my gratitude to the government under the able leadership of Prime Minister Mikati, the religious and civilian authorities and the people of Lebanon for the tremendous support, cooperation and good-will which they have extended to UNIFIL, and to me as Head of Mission and Force Commander. The success of our mission would not be possible without their continued support. Let me make a special mention of the local population in the area of operations: UNIFIL's success is their success; at the same time, they are the main beneficiaries of peace. Any progress is both to their credit and to their benefit. I, from the bottom of my heart, entreat them to continue supporting UNIFIL.

Lastly, let me turn to the military and civilian personnel who have been serving tirelessly in UNIFIL during my tenure your professionalism and dedication to service have been vital to the implementation of UNIFIL's mandate. I also wish to mention the excellent support I have received from the mission leadership. The commitment of each and every one of you to make a difference is what has enabled us to move ahead!

Last but not least, the achievements made to date would not have been possible without the strong commitment of the many troop-contributing countries, with their significant deployment of troops, maritime assets and financial resources to UNIFIL.

On this important occasion, I also wish to pay a special tribute to all those who lost their lives in the service of peace. Over the years, 293 UNIFIL military and civilian personnel have given their lives while serving in southern Lebanon. Their sacrifice has not been in vain, but shall encourage us, more than ever, to continue upholding the highest principles of the organization to which they dedicated their lives. Their courage will continue to inspire us!

As I bid farewell to you all, I warmly welcome Major General Paolo Serra. As many of you know, General Serra has had an outstanding career. After having served as Chief of Staff of the NATO Rapid Deployable Corps Italy; as Chief of the Forth Logistic Division, Italian army General Staff, and the Land Transformation Department in Rome, I am confident that, with the support of all parties, General Serra will continue to advance the implementation of UNIFIL's mission, and to strive towards achieving sustainable peace and stability for the people of southern Lebanon.

During the past two years spent between the hills and sea of southern Lebanon as UNIFIL Head of Mission and Force Commander, and my previous four months as Sector East Commander, I have grown very fond of Lebanon and the warmth and tremendous hospitality of

the people of southern Lebanon. As I bid farewell to my friends here, please rest assured that the country and its beautiful people will always stay very close to my heart.

Once again, my most sincere appreciation to all of you for your unwavering collaboration and warm friendship that I so much treasured throughout my tenure!

Many thanks, shukran jazeelan!

Maj-Gen Alberta Asarta Guevas
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