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The Deputy Secretary-General

Remarks at the Opening of the “War and Peace in Liberia” Photo Exhibit

Bronx Documentary Center, New York, 26 October 2018

It's truly an honour and I'm very humbled. It's not long ago that I joined my colleagues in Monrovia as the flag came down at the UN. It signalled a new era, a new generation that could embark upon the road to sustaining peace. It's one thing to achieve it and it's another to sustain it and just as our colleague from the mayor's office said, this is a long journey and we still need to accompany them. I truly appreciate having the opportunity today to come and say a few words to pay tribute to the legacy of Tim and Chris. Where is Christina? Somebody said she was behind here. It would be really nice of you to come forward. We need to see another woman up here.

applause

I'm going to talk about my own personal experiences with Liberia. I think that, you know, many of us have stories to tell and this is really one political will to come to action. The media plays a huge role we often underestimate, and it does it through many, many means but it's about bringing a story to life. It's about putting a face behind a figure or percentage. It's seeing so many of the things we just take for granted through a different lens. Today, looking at the pictures you have here, I think it's a reminder of the legacy so many of these journalists leave behind. Men and women with courage, with conviction, with passion. Human beings who really believe in the work they do and who have sacrificed an awful lot. Some don't come back, but I'm so grateful that we've been given the opportunity to see them today.

It's a real pleasure to be here with you this evening. I want to express my deep gratitude to the Bronx Documentary Center, the UNF, BDC and all the partners and friends who made this very powerful exhibition possible.

We are here to remember the conflict and violence that tore into an entire region of West Africa, the efforts that went into supporting the return to peace, and lives we lost.

We are also here to celebrate the work of two of the finest and bravest photojournalists of our time. Tim Hetherington and Chris Hondros, whose images helped to move the international community to action in Liberia. Their courage and tenacity made a difference. Sadly, they both lost their lives years later as they continued to pursue their life's work of shining a light on conflict.

These pictures we see today speak to us. They are a moving and sensitive account of the war in Liberia, full of emotional honesty and empathy.

On the walls are the faces of those who suffered: men, women and children; civilians and fighters; young and old. Perhaps what moves me most about these pictures is that we also see hope. We see progress. We see rebuilding. We see the steps on a new path towards sustainable development and at the end a sustainable peace. Above all, we see the determination of the people of Liberia to move forward towards a brighter future.

We see the powerful effects of international engagement--and don't let anyone tell you that international cooperation doesn't matter or that it is a thing of the past. We are interlinked, and it is essential that we do things together because we get further when we do them together. From a region led by my own country, Nigeria, and through the United Nations, which deployed peace operations into Liberia and the neighbouring countries of Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone – we really see the effects of that international engagement.

In March, I had the privilege, as I said earlier, of sharing some very emotional moments as I joined the government and people to celebrate their hard-won peace. But I can tell you that for the President of Liberia it was rather heavy. Because not only was he celebrating the burden of carrying of expectations of peace and sustaining it, but also of doing the right thing, living up to the expectations of those who voted him into office. And, by the way, I would say the largest cohort of those voters were young people

I also think of our colleagues who have also lost their lives and sacrificed. I wanted to pay tribute to the bravery and dedication of those who gave their lives for peace in Liberia.

So, I would like, right now, to ask you to join us in a moment of silence to honour them, their countries, their families, and all the victims of conflict in this region.

[PAUSE]

Thank you.

In Liberia, thousands of fighters gave up their weapons; hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced people returned home; elections were held and, as we heard, this led to the first peaceful democratic transition in the country's history.

I saw how strongly Liberians and particularly women and young people were committed to a new vision for their country: a vision of reconciliation, of social cohesion, and of sustainable development. A vision that allowed people to aspire to their right to a bright future.

Although our peacekeeping mission has closed, the UN is still supporting the people and government of Liberia. The Secretary-General underscores the importance of the transitions and that we do accompany the Liberians today – the destiny of sustainable peace. Our development agencies and many other offices are working with young people, with the marginalized, girls, women to build a brighter future. Liberia will continue to need the support of the international community to tell their stories, to leverage the support, to come back and partner. Not to give a

handout but offer a hand up. That's the dignity of which the Liberian deserve for the struggle that they've had.

One last message here:

This exhibition is Tim Hetherington's and Chris Hondros' legacy. Their photos bear witness to the worst failures of humanity. They also call on us to look, even when it would be easier to look away.

Together, Tim and Chris built a narrative in pictures, contributing to the collective testimony on conflict, in the hope that shining a light on war would change us, make us better people, and contribute to peace in our world.

Journalists, photographers and all media workers are contributing to our collective humanity. But every day, many of them face unacceptable risks just to do their jobs.

This year alone, at least 88 journalists have been killed, and many more have been harassed, detained or imprisoned.

The United Nations stands today, and all days, with journalists all over the world as they do their important work but also raise our voice. That they are protected from the fear of the conflict as they try to shine the light, not just to expose the atrocities but to somehow touch the hearts of leaders – so that we can end the conflict. It's not about the headlines it's about ending the atrocities and bringing that to us, touch our hearts.

So I thank all of you for being her and hope you get as much from this exhibition as I have.

My last time in Liberia, just before the war, I was a young person who was working for architects and engineers and I was sent to Monrovia to go look at a place that was called WARDA, the West Africa Rice Development Association. We were moving them to Côte d'Ivoire. I got there just at the brink of the war. You talked about the use of the US currency, but the dollar didn't have any value anymore. People were pushing wheelbarrows with coins. It was a shock for us coming from Nigeria. Very soon after that came the catastrophes and the tragedies of war. I do remember that my husband, who was a pilot, telling me about the risks they took to land in Monrovia. Because at the end of the runway, there is a swamp. And in that swamp, many, many souls have been lost.

And so for us today, it does bring back memories and I think it reinvigorates our spirit, our conviction that we do every little thing we can possibly contribute towards ending wars likes these senseless wars. Not forgetting root causes.

I come from a part of Nigeria, North East Nigeria - it's where Boko Haram was born. That's where I went to school. Now, I'm the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations – terrorists are not born. There are perfect storms that are created from exclusions, from a lack of respecting people's lives, from corruption. There are reasons that we know, and we have to put an end to that.

So today as we look at the pictures around here, it is a memory of things that shouldn't happen. But it is also a memory telling us to go back and make another firm commitment to putting our little stitch in the tapestry of peace and ensuring that these photos never have to be taken again. A memory to ensure that the ones we take from here on out are of prosperity, are of people aspirations, are of beautiful pictures that we see in the galleries around. And not ones that remind us of, perhaps, the dark side of humanity.

So, thank you very much for having me and thank you for keeping the memories alive.