The year 2003 was one of the most challenging in the history of the United Nations. It began with divisions in the Security Council on how to resolve the Iraq crisis. Despite intense diplomatic efforts, some Member States took the position that the use of force was necessary. The war in Iraq that followed severely tested long-standing principles of collective security and the very resilience of the Organization.

United Nations personnel returned to Iraq in June to provide humanitarian and reconstruction assistance, and to help Iraqis establish post-conflict governance institutions and arrangements. But on 19 August, a savage terrorist attack on the Organization’s headquarters in Baghdad resulted in the death of my Special Representative, Sergio Vieira de Mello, and 21 others, and the wounding of many more. The loss of such dear friends and courageous colleagues was a terrible blow to the United Nations, personally and professionally. It also raised fundamental questions about how best to protect our personnel and pursue our work in volatile situations where the United Nations is needed but may also become a target. The Organization continues to mourn our losses and wrestle with these complex questions.

In addition to the controversies and tragedies surrounding the Iraq crisis, many other challenges cast a shadow over the world in 2003, including international terrorism, the risks associated with weapons of mass destruction, a surge in infectious disease—epitomized by the effects of AIDS in Africa—and the long-standing blights of extreme poverty, hunger, environmental degradation, human rights violations and humanitarian emergencies. I told the General Assembly in September that the international system had reached a “fork in the road” in its efforts to meet these challenges. It was against that backdrop of acute concern that, in November, I established a High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change and asked it to assess current threats to global security, and then to make bold yet practicable recommendations for improving the world’s ability to face those threats, and for reforming the United Nations itself.

Through its coverage of a difficult year, this volume of the Yearbook of the United Nations shows that the achievement of the purposes of our Organization requires a shared consensus about its fundamental goals. While Member States need not agree on all issues, they should, in calculating their national interests, give due weight to the value and importance of a just and stable world order.

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