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Temporary President
of the 31st session of the General Conference
of the United Nations Educational,
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(UNESCO)

at the inaugural meeting of the
31st session of the General Conference

Paris, 15 October 2001

Ms Sonia Mendieta de Badaroux, Chairperson of the Executive Board,
Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to extend to you all a very warm welcome. I have the honour and privilege of presiding over the opening of the 31st session of the General Conference of UNESCO, in accordance with Rule 28 of the Rules of Procedure of the General Conference. I therefore declare open the 31st session of the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Ladies and gentlemen, before we begin our work, I wish to pay tribute to the memory of personalities deceased since the 30th session. On this occasion, let us also pay tribute to the thousands of innocent victims of terror and violence in the United States of America and in other regions of the world. I now invite you to observe one minute's silence in their memory.

Madam Chairperson of the Executive Board, Mr Director-General, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen: two years have elapsed and we all find ourselves in a new century and a new millennium; it is therefore time to examine our successes and failures. We must also think very seriously of the future, in view of the new and awesome challenges we are facing.

However, I should like to begin by expressing my thanks to those of you who honoured me with their vote of confidence two years ago. I accepted this honour with deep gratitude and a strong sense of responsibility towards all Member States in all continents. I have had occasion to visit different parts of the world, and should like to take this opportunity to offer my thanks for the gracious reception that I received in the countries I have visited.

During this biennium, the Secretariat of the Organization has undergone great changes, in accordance with the decisions taken by the last General Conference. Many of the changes have been unavoidably painful. Some of the fruits of these changes brought about by the Director-General have not yet been fully reaped, and a certain unrest still prevails within the Secretariat, but that is also understandable. I am a doctor, and therefore I know that inflammation is the first phase of healing and some inflammation still lingers on. But the healing is proceeding.

Our thanks and our deepest esteem are due to the Director-General for the extremely arduous task that he has carried out, as well as to all the Secretariat staff, who have pursued their task with loyalty during this difficult period of reconstruction. I should also like to address my warmest thanks to the Chairperson of the Executive Board, Ms Sonia Mendieta de Badaroux and the Members of the Board, in particular to those who, coming directly from their countries, enable us to assess the most urgent needs and aspirations of their fellow citizens.

We are all here to complete and approve the Programme and Budget for the next two years. While the structure of the programme may not be dramatically changed during our deliberations, the projects that we will approve can and should reflect today's pressing needs, for there is a new, dangerous situation that has to be confronted.

That day of 11 September and the unimaginable horror perpetrated in the United States of America can never be forgotten. As many have said, it was not only an attack on the United States, but also an attack on democracy, on all faiths, on life itself. The enormity of the attack, the financial resources it evidently required as well as the expert knowledge, along with irrational fanaticism – all of that is frightening. The terror may strike anywhere, at any time, without any regard for how much will be sacrificed, how many lives lost, how much precious heritage lost, and the irreparable damage that may be done to the environment.

UNESCO does not deal in politics, nor does it have arms. Our weapons are of a different sort, the first and mightiest of them being education. And culture, too, as it can bring people together and contribute to greater understanding between cultures. There are also science and technology. We have to use all these weapons to the best of our ability in order to prevent the breeding of terrorists and combat hate, the deadliest poison of all. We should try to break the vicious circle in which distrust, fear and hate are being passed on from generation to generation. And, in these efforts women can, at least in most countries, and should, play a principal role, particularly as they are often the ones who shape the minds of the young.

UNESCO must of course try to do its utmost to ensure freedom of the press and of the media in general, for it is the view of many experts that hate campaigns mostly surface where the media are not independent. Hate campaigns are indeed deadly, for all. Where an injury is done, anger and thirst for justice are understandable, but hate, especially hate against whole nations or religions, cannot and must not be sanctioned.

In this the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, it is vital that we establish such a dialogue if we want to achieve peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding and a dignified life for all human beings. I am sure that the young people who attended the Youth Forum held here during the past few days will contribute to this goal.

Enhancing human dignity through the alleviation of poverty, in close coordination with other United Nations agencies, is a major element permeating all the programmes and projects submitted for your consideration. In-depth studies tell us that civil wars have more often resulted from poverty than from ethnic diversity. And a country in the grip of conflict is more likely to become a refuge for terrorists. It is therefore essential that we work towards reducing the gap between the more affluent and the poor countries, or at least, as a first step, to see to it that it does not widen further. To achieve this, the poor and marginalized must have access to education and the acquisition of basic skills, including the art of maintenance. They must be able to feel proud of their cultural heritage and, at the same time, to open their hearts to the cultures of others, thus reducing mistrust and misunderstanding among people. They must have access to information vital for their well-being, such as AIDS prevention campaigns, to give but one example. Everything has to be done to give a chance to the enormous human and intellectual potential of the marginalized areas of our world, and it is the responsibility of all, not only the former colonial powers.

It is indeed my deep conviction that UNESCO's main role is to contribute, within its mandate, to a more dignified way of life for all on our planet, where dialogue among civilizations and mutual respect for the diversity of cultures should prevail. To do so, UNESCO, as the sole intellectual agency of the United Nations, must focus on the ethical aspects of its fields of competence, including science, as I stressed two years ago.

Today we find ourselves at a crossroads. What happened on 11 September concerns all of us. It was an unprecedented outrage, a terrible crime, which has to be punished. What did the perpetrators of that horrendous mass murder aim to achieve? To inflict a terrible wound on the

United States of America, to democracy; to paralyse the world of business; and to drive a wedge between nations and cultures? This is a gathering of enlightened people. We should not fall into the trap of terrorists who want to lure us into a conflict between religions and cultures. We must do our utmost to defend civilization and culture against barbarism. All religions and cultures must stand together in this effort based on universal values.

I believe, just like the Director-General, that the role of UNESCO now is more crucial than ever. The time to theorize about the visibility of UNESCO has passed; we have to think about the effectiveness of what will be approved by this General Conference. It is deeds that count, deeds that become visible because they are effective, results that are accountable.

I should like to conclude by stating what I always stress, on all occasions: Whoever violates the human dignity of another, destroys his own. Whoever elevates the human dignity of others enhances his own. May your deliberations be blessed by wisdom and foresight.

Thank you for your attention.