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of the United Nations Educational,  
Scientific and Cultural Organization  
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the official opening of the  
31st session of the General Conference

Paris, 15 October 2001

Madam President,  
Ministers,  
Madam President of the General Conference,  
Madam Chairperson of the Executive Board,  
Distinguished Ministers,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

When we last met together two years ago, the approach of a new century and a new millennium stimulated a heightened sense of hope and expectation throughout the world. Sadly, today we are more preoccupied with fears and anxieties about what the future may bring. The stark image of “ground zero” in lower Manhattan summons forth long-stored mental pictures of London, Berlin and Hiroshima five decades ago at the end of a war that gave birth to the United Nations and UNESCO. However, this evocation of past scenes of destruction and violence also alerts us to the fact that the situation is not the same, not least because war between the major powers has been averted for over 50 years. The threat to international peace and security today is new and different. We are still in the early stages of reconfiguring our view of the world.

Many assumptions and beliefs have been challenged by the events of 11 September 2001. In particular, it will be necessary to deepen and extend the concept of human security so that it fully encompasses the new reality and can adapt to further developments to come. UNESCO, whose Constitution (Article I) states that its fundamental purpose is “to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations”, has always approached the question of security in a distinctive way that goes to the very essence of its mandate and mission. UNESCO’s task is to work upon “the minds of men” through its fields of competence. Its task, in other words, is to defend peace and promote security by addressing what people think, how they think, and the way in which values and attitudes shape their choices, decisions and actions. When we consider the direction towards which people must turn if peace and security are to prosper – namely, towards universal respect for justice, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms – we can see the continuing relevance and importance of UNESCO’s mission for our troubled world.

This session of the General Conference is then all the more important, since it is the first occasion of a general policy debate among ministers of the whole world since the events of 11 September. The fact that the meeting is actually taking place as planned is an unmistakable expression of our collective political will to foil the attempts of international terrorism to destabilize and intimidate. Of course, we cannot carry on as if nothing had happened. International terrorism is now on our agenda. But it is not for the terrorists to determine that agenda, and let us never give them a chance to do so. We may all be sure that in the course of the general policy debate, when we analyse together the results of the reform process at UNESCO, or when we discuss the Medium-Term Strategy and the Programme and Budget for the next biennium, you will realize how vital – now more than ever – UNESCO’s mission is, and how central a role the Organization must play in human affairs.

It is, therefore, with particular feeling that I have the pleasure of wishing you all a warm welcome to this 31st session of the General Conference: welcome to the representatives of Member States and Associate Members, of course, but also to the representatives of agencies of the United Nations system, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations, and to the various observers. Your presence today is, in itself, a tremendous sign of hope.

I conclude this brief address with a glowing tribute to the host country, France, whose considerable effort to reinforce our own security arrangements has made it possible to hold the Conference for a start. I think that we can all be grateful to it for that.

Thank you.