

# 9/11 through the Eyes of a Diplomat. A Personal Experience

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Other speakers have - and will - address this morning the multifaceted issues of the consequences of what happened in New York City ten years ago on both domestic politics and international relations. So allow me, amid these reflexions, to step one level lower and to share with you some of my personal reminiscences connected with this event. I was at the time the permanent representative of my country to the UN, and being there, I realized again, very vividly and palpably, just as earlier in places like Bosnia or Chechnya, how different it is to watch something on your TV screen and to be right in the middle of all this.

## **On September 9, 2001**

On September 9, 2001 - upon my return to New York from a vacation in Hungary - I was invited by the mayor of Tenaflly, a small town on the Hudson river, close to New York, to attend the official inauguration of the Peace Plaza, a memorial to the TWA victims of 1989. In my speech I said that international terrorism was unequivocally present in the world, that it was a global problem and knew no national borders. I added that mankind still had to travel a long distance before it could reach its destination and create genuine peace.

Well, no one in the audience gathered in the main square of that small town knew that just two days later that goal of peace would be further away than ever. A couple of weeks later I received a letter from the mayor in which she said, among others, that from the early morning of September 12, flowers and candles had covered the freshly inaugurated memorial, and that people started to gather around it throughout the next two weeks. She also wrote that „We did not suspect how far away is the goal we are trying to reach“.

Back in New York, on an ordinary Tuesday which was September 11, I went to my office at the mission on 52nd Street at 8.50 in the morning, as usual. Just minutes later, one of my colleagues came into my room and asked me to switch on the TV. Others from our mission joined us in my office as we all stared at the TV screen, incredulous. At that point I thought that a terrible accident might have occurred, but this idea quickly dissipated when, around 9 o'clock, the second tower also burst into flames. A strange feeling overwhelmed me which, I guess, comes when one witnesses something dramatic, hard to believe, something unprecedented that goes beyond imagination. No, I did not think for a moment that what I was seeing was some kind of a fiction movie. I knew it was real.

## **Tension mounted**

Soon, I had to hurry to the UN building which was at a walking distance from 52nd, since at 10 o'clock - in connection with the opening of the 56th session of the UN General Assembly - Secretary General Kofi Annan was supposed to toll the peace bell of the pagoda, a gift from Japan, which stands in the garden of the UN Headquarters. This annual traditional ceremony is performed in the presence of the ambassadors of the UN member States. I walked down Second Avenue towards the UN building and saw nothing unusual in the streets. However, when I reached the garden, people around the pagoda were already engaged in heated discussions. While we were waiting there for the SG to appear, the information fell on us that the security services of the world organisation had strongly advised him not to leave his York Avenue residence. In the meantime, blue uniformed UN guards began to evacuate the 38-storey building of the Secretariat and people started to flood into the square in front of it.

Loudspeakers instructed the crowd that non-essential personnel should go home. Tension mounted and after half-an-hour it became clear that the ceremony would not take place.

So I left the UN garden. By this time, around 11 a.m., 2nd Avenue was already filled with people, walking up to the North from downtown Manhattan. Traffic was still moving, but you could simply not ignore the expressions on people's faces as they were hurrying by in long lines. What I could detect from those faces, those eyes and the body language of those people betrayed disbelief, hesitation, uncertainty and fear. When I returned to my mission, I was stunned to see the collapse of both towers of the WTC. Obviously, the daily programme of the mission was totally upset, and as the minutes went by, Manhattan was gradually overwhelmed by a smell similar to that of burned tires. You could simply not escape it and it stayed with the Manhattan residents for one or two long weeks.

## **Traffic practically stopped**

The look of Manhattan had also changed, traffic practically stopped. I took my bike, rode to the West Side and then turned south. Honestly, anyone familiar with the usual traffic chaos in Manhattan will understand how strange and even intimidated I felt, riding my bike through the heart of Manhattan - ordinarily very busy thoroughfares - without having to stop at all. At times, one or two yellow cabs passed by, but I had the impression that I was almost alone in the Big Apple. An awesome and bizarre impression. At 14th street, the police already cordoned off the area. There, a crowd of anxious and curious New Yorkers gathered and were fixing their eyes to the South. Where, instead of the familiar sight of the huge towers, grey clouds of smoke were billowing towards the sky. The smell of burned objects was much stronger there than in Midtown Manhattan.

## **Two days after the attack on the Twin Towers**

Two days after the attack on the Twin Towers, I undertook a lengthy walking tour to the downtown area where the NYPD and the National Guard were handling the movement of people and the rescue operations already at work. In those hard days I could visually observe how New Yorkers were reacting to what was going on, what their attitude and frame of mind were. I saw long lines of people waiting at improvised first-aid stations to give their blood for those who needed it. They did not yet know that there was hardly any need in blood donations since the terror attack on the WTC had not left wounded, only dead and mostly missing persons. Along West Side Highway, people gathered on both sides of the street and were cheering the firefighters, the ambulances, the trucks and the police vehicles, waving the Stars and Stripes, offering the rescue workers food and drink, as they drove down towards Ground Zero, a designation, a name which by now had become more than a symbol. On Union Square, towards the evening, countless candles were burning, a huge crowd, some standing, some kneeling, surrounded them and there was silence. Among the candles were all kinds of messages and papers with the names of those missing. Some mirrored emotions that, beyond grief, sadness and shock, portrayed America's capacity to survive, like „Stand tall, New York ! We will not be beaten !“, or „Our country will always be a free nation !“, or another one, „I never loved you more, New York !“, and they also expressed determination, like „We will fight back !“, and hatred of the perpetrators of the terrible act. Looking around, you could see on walls and lamp posts hand-written signs and posters asking for information about missing

relatives and friends.

I had the opportunity, thanks to one of the deputy-mayors of New York, to visit a military naval hospital on the Hudson, commandeered from California, with the most sophisticated surgical equipment. Here, too, I had to face reality : there was no one to operate, to treat. The operating rooms stood empty, for the Twin Towers, as they crumbled, had crushed everything and everybody. The sight of those twisted heavy steel beams amassed on the sidewalks of lower Manhattan sufficed to explain what had become of those thousands of people who happened to be in the Towers on that fateful Tuesday morning. Afterwards, the debris from the site of the WTC was taken in trucks to Staten Island where, for weeks, specially trained personnel was going to examine it meticulously, looking for human remains. I also visited the spacious information and rehabilitation center set up by the city authorities to receive those looking for missing people, and watched as the experts sought to help the minds and souls of those who came not only with human words but with the Labrador dogs known for their friendliness, and which stood there quietly, as people caressed them, as if aware what their role was in all this. New York - and America - had stood up brilliantly in those days and weeks that tested their citizens' discipline and resolve. They had shown the world what unity and solidarity mean. And I am grateful to destiny for having allowed me to witness all this at first hand, directly on the spot, offering an opportunity to live through something that happens very rarely in one's life, if ever. It also showed in this troubled world of ours the better, the more encouraging and more hopeful face of mankind.

## **The UN Headquarters had acquired the look of a besieged fortress**

For obvious reasons, the original schedule of the 2001 annual session of the General Assembly had been totally disrupted. The UN Headquarters had acquired the look of a besieged fortress, with countless police officers around and huge trucks, filled with sand, parked in the middle of First Avenue across the UN building, constituting some sort of a physical obstacle to all eventualities. Hence, First Avenue was closed to traffic and ID checks became very frequent in the surrounding area. The proceedings in the GA took place in a very special psychological atmosphere. The day after the attack on the Twin Towers, the Security Council adopted by consensus a resolution „condemning in the strongest terms the horrifying terrorist attacks“, „calling on all States to work together urgently to bring to justice“ those responsible and expressed „its readiness to take all necessary steps to respond“ to the attacks of 9/11. The plenary of the General Assembly acted likewise the same day, voting for a similar resolution. A weeklong debate took place in the GA specifically on the question of terrorism, where, unprecedentedly, representatives of 174 States had taken the floor. As permanent representative of Hungary, I said in my statement that what had happened in the United States was a wake-up call, perhaps the last wake-up call for all of us. I recalled that at the UN we had already been talking for some time about the threat carried by international terrorism, and we had taken some steps in the right direction. Nonetheless, we were all unprepared for the events of 9/11. In light of the very first instinctive and understandable reactions to those events, I wished to emphasize in my speech that combating terrorism should encompass all areas of human activities. It should involve diplomacy, military and security measures, law enforcement and the judiciary, intelligence services, economic and financial as well as social and humanitarian efforts. In order to be effective, I continued, we should focus on the issues

causing instability and conflict, for they are the breeding ground for terrorism. I underlined that, at the same time, our commitment to fighting terrorism had definitely nothing to do with ideas propagating conflict and confrontation between various religious beliefs and cultural traditions, and we should also resolutely reject cheap demagoguery, extremist nationalism and racism.

All this was said ten years ago. These points of view have been repeated ever since in many places by many people. Today, we are much wiser and, also, more experienced than we were a decade ago. We know by now what fanaticism and unbridled bigotry mean and also how vulnerable humans are. Yet, the challenge is still there. In this turbulent world, combating terrorism worldwide means continuing to manage a very particular, highly complicated multifaceted endeavour that has interrelated economic, social, political, technological, military and, last but not least, psychological aspects. By way of conclusion, I should like to be bold enough to say it on behalf of the whole mankind, our human family living in this „global village“, that I wish for success on this bumpiest of roads.

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## **P.-S.**

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