

Speech by HOM and Force Commander
Meeting with local authorities and religious leaders
28 august 2014

Respected religious leaders,

Distinguished representatives of the local authorities,

Dear friends from the Lebanese army and security forces,

Military and civilian personnel of UNIFIL,

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to UNIFIL, I am extremely pleased to be with all of you today.

I have been looking forward to this meeting. UNIFIL is here at the invitation of the Lebanese government and the Lebanese people, and it is very important for me to get to know my hosts, and for you to get to know me early on.

From the moment I assumed UNIFIL command on 24 July, I have only found open doors, sincere support and a unity of goals with all my interlocutors in Lebanon. So, first of all, I have invited you here to thank you for your warm and extraordinary hospitality to UNIFIL over the years – and to me since my arrival.

I will take this opportunity to introduce myself and share with you some of my initial thoughts on the assignment that I am much honored to have been selected for.

I joined the Italian army in 1981 and had the good fortune of serving in different positions as part of Italian military missions in the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan. Before taking office here in Lebanon, I was Deputy COS

for operations at the joint operations headquarters in Rome, which oversees all peacekeeping operations of Italian military personnel.

Having been in this region before, although never in Lebanon, I am fully aware of what an extraordinary, fascinating and challenging part of the world this is and I am greatly looking forward to a fulfilling experience with UNIFIL.

Of course, there is still much I have to learn from you and from my colleagues, so please be patient with me, especially in the beginning. But the one thing I already know is that the success of UNIFIL relies on the support of the local population.

My experience has taught me that durable peace cannot be imposed; it is won and cultivated through selfless effort, and by respecting and understanding the history, the needs and the minds of those we are here to serve.

For this reason, I fully intend to carry on with the tradition of having good and close contacts with all of you: religious leaders, governors, qaemaaqqams, and municipal, local, and community leaders.

By talking and partnering with all of you, UNIFIL personnel are able to direct our resources and capabilities to benefit the people of the south.

I would like you to know that the colleagues who reach out to you, whether military or civilian, carry my message and also relay to me immediately the concerns or problems that you share with them.

One concern that I am aware of is that our operations, in particular our patrols, can sometimes interfere with your daily activities.

Let me assure you that we are making every effort to minimise our impact on the civilian population. There are, however, essential activities that our troops must carry out, either with the Lebanese armed forces or alone.

I am determined to help you maintain the security and stability that is our common goal. I ask for your support in bringing this message back to your communities.

Although the main mandate of UNIFIL is to help maintaining stability and security through our operational activities, I hope you all know that we always do our best to address some of the great needs of the communities in the south.

When we have funding, we undertake projects in the municipalities, to assist with water and electricity supply, refurbishment of schools and health facilities, road rehabilitation, and much more.

When we don't have funding, we still use our people for outreach activities on important issues such as mine awareness, environmental conservation, and road safety. We also put our diverse skills at your disposal with training and capacity building activities.

All these activities are as important for you as they are for us. Any activity that brings us closer to you helps us to understand you better. Any positive impact that we have on your communities motivates us to push forward with our effort.

I am aware that water, energy, waste management are some of the major challenges that local communities are facing in south Lebanon. UNIFIL cannot and does not intend to replace the national authorities in providing these services. However, we will continue to support the central and local governments and collaborate with local municipalities.

As I stand here talking to you, i am humbled by the relationship that UNIFIL has managed to carve out with the people of south Lebanon over the years.

When two parties have a long relationship, such as the one between us, there are bound to be differences, as there usually are in any human interaction. Misunderstandings can arise, due to language or cultural barriers, or even due to unfounded rumours.

If trust is hard to establish, it is even harder to maintain it. But I will work very hard to maintain the trust that you have generously put in UNIFIL.

You should know that I place great emphasis on open, honest and transparent communication.

I also want you to know that UNIFIL personnel are regularly briefed on culturally appropriate ways of consultation and participation, to better assist you and to prevent any misunderstanding.

Since this is our first meeting, i want to especially reiterate that channels of communication between you and UNIFIL are open, will remain open and that the mission will continue to give you an attentive ear.

I am very happy and greatly encouraged by your presence here today and i look forward to meeting you regularly in the future, to hear your feedback – whether positive or, i hope more rarely, negative.

I ask you to let us know what more we can do, what we can do better, so that our collaboration will continue to flourish and we can continue to successfully support you in reaching the peace and prosperity you deserve.

The floor is yours; I look forward to hearing from you.