Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the ceremony to award the United Nations Association of Germany’s 2016 Dag Hammarskjöld Honorary Medal to Angela Kane and Staffan de Mistura

2016-11-22

-- Translation of advance text --

Detlef Dzembritzki,

Angela Kane,

Staffan de Mistura,

Esteemed members of the United Nations Association of Germany,

Ladies and gentlemen,

“It is when we all play safe that we create a world of utmost insecurity.” Those are the words of Dag Hammarskjöld, the great

UN

Secretary-General and namesake of the medal we are awarding tonight.

To turn that around the other way, what he was saying was that, if we want to create peace, we must never simply take the path of least resistance. We must show courage. We cannot stick to the well-worn paths but must forge new roads. We must always be prepared to go the extra mile.

Angela Kane, Staffan de Mistura,

You have demonstrated time and again that you are not ones to simply follow signposted roads. You have proven your willingness to stick your necks out in pursuit of peace and security.

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Angela Kane,

You needed and you demonstrated courage and leadership in Damascus in August 2013, when you negotiated the Syrian regime's hand-over of its chemical weapons. While you were in Damascus, chemical weapons were deployed again. You sent your teams to investigate, to establish what had happened and bring transparency to those crimes. Your work on the ground played a major role in bringing about Syria's accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention. Even more importantly, particularly dangerous chemical weapons were removed from the hands of a regime that not only possessed them but was known to be willing to use them against its own population. Let me thank you for that most especially!

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Ms Kane, on your way to the top echelons of the

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– on your way to becoming the most high-ranking German woman on the

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staff – you repeatedly and successfully demonstrated your abilities as a tough negotiator, and not only in dealings with member states. Some would say, with a mixture of affection and cynicism, that you have managed to cope with an even tougher negotiating partner, namely the bureaucracy of the United Nations! As head of the

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Department of Management, you were responsible for the renovation of

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headquarters on New York's East River. Not only did you implement that mammoth project, you also, even more impressively, got it done on time and on budget. Airports and concert halls in Germany have shown us just how hard that can be – even when you're only building for one client. And you had 193 clients to please!

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You not only managed to forge new paths within the United Nations. You also always had an eye for the political significance of your duties. As

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High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, you intervened in the gun-ownership debate in the United States. You took to the American press to publicly dispel deliberate misinformation

being spread about the United Nations and its campaign against small arms. That’s very unusual for a high-ranking

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official. And it is brave to hold up a mirror to the gun lobby in the US.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

The discussions surrounding the selection of the new

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Secretary-General this year made it clear once again that issues of gender equality are on the agenda in the

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as they are elsewhere, especially when it comes to filling important posts. While much remains to be done, there has been a significance cultural shift since you started work at the

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in 1977, without a supportive network and, some claim, without a valid work visa... There were no female role models back then, no women who had made it right to the very top levels of the

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. You made it there, and you also made it into a number of previously male-only domains – as deputy head of a peace mission and later as head of the

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Office for Disarmament Affairs. To go back to our metaphor, you have at the very least cleared a good deal of the undergrowth from the path for the women who will follow you and have you as a potential role model.

Ms Kane, please accept my sincere congratulations on receiving the Dag Hammarskjöld Honorary Medal tonight!

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Staffan de Mistura,

I was talking with my fellow Bundestag members from the Social Democratic Party this afternoon about the intricate complexities of the Syria conflict. We know how hard it is at the moment to achieve even the smallest amount of humanitarian progress. And we are seeing recurrent setbacks at the political level, like when the Syrian regime rejected your proposals for an autonomous zone in Aleppo at the beginning of this week. Even under these difficult conditions, you are resolutely plodding on. I find myself wondering what drives you, Staffan – what gives you the strength.

Perhaps it is the difficult moments, the moments of human suffering, that drive you to fight for peace. You have been deployed in more than than 20 different crises and conflicts. You were in Iraq and Afghanistan most recently, served as a humanitarian aid worker in the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia before that and have also worked in Rwanda and Somalia. In the 1970s, when you were stationed in Cyprus for the

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, you saw with your own eyes how a child was killed at the divided island's demarcation line. You responded with what you called constructive outrage – not stagnating in shock and dismay but engaging your will to change things, to combat the horror.

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Watching you work these days, Staffan, as you tirelessly nurture ties between the conflict parties in the Syria talks and keep channels of communication open with all involved, one sees precisely that constructive outrage in action.

I can well remember one of those complicated meetings of the International Syria Support Group. Since we're among

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experts today, and the

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is notoriously fond of its abbreviations, I have no qualms about using the English acronym: ISSG. We were standing together after an ISSG meeting – I exhausted, you still full of energy. When I hesitantly asked you what drove you to keep going even after such a difficult marathon of a meeting, you told me about the thick black book with gold trim which you kept on your desk. No, not the Bible or the Koran. It is a book containing the names of the people who have lost their lives to the civil war in Syria. Your answer to my question was, "Frank, this is what spurs me on."

Staffan, you convert your outrage at the violence in Syria into positive energy which you bring to bear on the conflict parties.

Whenever things start to get particularly tight, whenever the atmosphere in the negotiating room seems to be getting too pressurised and opposing views become increasingly irreconcilable, people's eyes turn to you. How often you have deployed that Italian elegance which I have always admired in you, and that knack of finding exactly the right words, to bring negotiating partners back to the table – even those who had already booked their tickets home to leave the Syria talks for good!

You kept working on that delegation until you finally persuaded them; instead of the talks collapsing completely with a unilateral walk-out, you were able to establish a temporary break. That may look like a small, maybe just semantic victory from the outside, but the reality is that you demonstrated that individual players cannot unilaterally end this crucial process. You clipped the wings of the "spoilers", the veto players. Without you, we would not even have a political process any more. It is you who guarantees the possibility that there may still be a political settlement to this horrific war. You know you have my, and our, full support!

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Ladies and gentlemen,

In case I've now made you think that Staffan de Mistura's work for peace in Syria takes up all his time, let me disabuse you. Staffan, you hold another important office. For a change, it's not a diplomatic job for the

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in your capacity as a citizen of the world. You are an honorary consul for your native country, Sweden, on the beautiful Mediterranean island of Capri. And you even live there. It's probably a good thing this kind of job isn't advertised, as the number of applicants would be through the roof!

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Ladies and gentlemen,

In these turbulent times, we are putting our faith in the power of multilateral diplomacy. The United Nations is the cornerstone of a rules-based international order. There are many things the

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needs to truly fulfil that function, but nothing is more essential than excellent staff – staff for whom working for the United Nations is more than just a job; leaders who don’t make things easy for themselves but are persistent in their search for solutions, creative and courageous. In short, Angela Kane, Staffan de Mistura, it needs people like you. We need people like you in the United Nations, and the United Nations needs you! I am therefore delighted that you are receiving the Honorary Medal of the United Nations Association of Germany, which is named after another great

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figure: Dag Hammarskjöld. My most heartfelt congratulations to you both!

Thank you very much.

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