

End of year message

by NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer

As the year 2005 draws to a close, I want to extend to all those who are working in and for the NATO Alliance my sincere appreciation, and to send to you and your families my very best wishes for a happy and healthy new year.

As we approach the new year, it is a very appropriate moment to look back on the last 12 months and all that has taken place. Firstly I want to pay tribute to those of your fellow servicemen who this year paid the highest price for peace in the service of NATO. We owe them a debt of gratitude.

More widely, 2005 was a year that saw many tragedies, from terrorist attacks to natural disasters. Yet this was also a year in which the transatlantic community demonstrated a strong resolve to come to grips with a volatile security environment.

Through our Alliance, we were able to make a real difference in addressing entirely new and complex challenges. NATO provided urgent humanitarian relief to the victims of the Pakistan earthquake.

We provided logistical support to the African Union's peacekeeping operation in the war-torn region of Darfur. These decisions have opened a new chapter in NATO's evolution.

We have made good progress in other areas as well. NATO provided security for the successful parliamentary elections in Afghanistan. We opened a NATO-supported Joint Staff College in Iraq.

We launched an Intensified Dialogue with Ukraine on that country's NATO membership aspirations and related reforms. And we built closer ties to our neighbours in the Mediterranean Region and in the Gulf.

If 2005 was busy, I have no doubt that 2006 will be even busier. Not least because of our Summit meeting in Riga next November.

Next year will see our support for peace and security in Afghanistan rise to a new level, with a further expansion of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force and the start of a special Afghan cooperation programme and a new chapter in Afghanistan's history.

2006 will also be a critical year for the future of Kosovo. Now that talks on the future of Kosovo have started, it will be crucial for the Alliance to maintain its robust presence on the

ground and to continue to support the political process – and we are determined to do that.

More widely, we are also determined to ensure that the NATO Response Force achieves full operational capability next year, and to underline that NATO's military transformation is firmly on track.

When the Alliance's Heads of State and Government meet in Riga next November, I am confident that they will find NATO in excellent shape.

NATO's successful operations and missions depend to a large extent on the dedication and professionalism of the many people who are working for the Alliance.

That of course includes all colleagues in Brussels and at the Alliance's other headquarters, commands and agencies. And it includes the men and women of NATO's deployed forces – who are the personification of the Alliance's solidarity, and of its enduring commitment to peace and stability.

This is the time of year when we all wish to be home with our loved ones. To those of you whose duties make this impossible – because they are serving in Iraq, Pakistan, the Balkans, Afghanistan, or on a ship patrolling the Mediterranean Sea – let me just say that we are thinking of you. We thank you.

And we are proud of you. You are performing an exceptional service for peace in this world.

And that is what this holiday season is really all about.

Avec ceci, il ne me reste plus qu'à vous souhaiter, à toutes et à tous, de joyeuses fêtes et une très bonne année.

Tous mes vœux également à vos familles dont certaines vont célébrer cette période de fête sans vous. Qu'ils profitent également de Noël et puissent vous retrouver très prochainement à la maison.