

Thank you, Mr. President, Mr. Secretary General, ladies and gentlemen, ministers, distinguished ambassadors. I would like to begin by telling you how pleased France is and how pleased I am that on this decisive day the presidency of the Security Council is held by Guinea.

I would like to thank Mr. Blix and Mr. ElBaradei for the presentation they have just given us. Their reports testified to regular progress in the disarmament of Iraq.

And what have the inspectors told us? That for a month Iraq has been actively cooperating with them, that substantial progress has been made, that new prospects are opening up with the recent question of several scientists. Significant evidence of real disarmament has now been observed, and that is indeed the key to Resolution 1441.

Therefore, I would like to address questions to all of you today, and it's the very same question being asked by people all over the world. Why should we now engage in war with Iraq? Why smash the instruments that have just proven their effectiveness? Why choose division when our unity is leading Iraq to get rid of its weapons of mass destruction? Why should we wish to proceed by force at any price when we can succeed peacefully?

War is always an acknowledgment of failure. Let us not resign ourselves to the irreparable. Before making our choice, let us weigh the consequences. Let us measure the effects of our decision as far as the method that we have chosen worked, works and will work.

As the European Union noted, these inspections cannot continue indefinitely. The pace must therefore be stepped up. However, the military agenda must not dictate the calendar of inspections. We agree on an accelerated calendar, but we cannot accept an ultimatum as long as the inspectors are reporting cooperation. That would mean war. That would lead the Security Council to give up its responsibility.

There may be some who believe that these problems can be resolved by force, creating a new order. But this is not what France believes. On the contrary, we believe that the use of force can arouse hatred, fuel a clash of identities and of cultures, something that our generation has a prime responsibility to avoid and that will be highly damageable for the next generations.

To those who believe that war would be the quickest way of disarming Iraq, I can reply that it will drive wedges and create wounds that will be long in healing. And how many victims will it cause? How many families will grieve?

France always said so: we are not excluding the possibility of an appeal to military force, IF the reports showed the impossibility for inspectors to continue their work. The council will have to take a decision and its members will have to face their responsibility.

Mister President, to those who are wondering when and how we will be going to war, I would like to say that, in the Security Council, nothing will never be done in precipitation, incomprehension, suspicion or fear. In the temple of the United Nations, we are the keepers of an ideal, of a conscience. Our role is to give priority to a peaceful disarmament. And it's the old country and the old continent that are mine, a country and a continent which have known barbarism, war and occupation; a country which knows what the inhabitants of the new world did for its freedom; a country whose aim is to actively participate to the construction of a better world; that is today rejecting a military intervention in Iraq.