

VOA NEWS

Britain's Monarch Urges Tolerance in Christmas Message (25 Dec 2004, 23:50 UTC)

In her Christmas message to Britain and all of the Commonwealth, Queen Elizabeth says tolerance and respect for others is key to building a more peaceful world.

Britain's 78-year-old monarch looked relaxed and at ease in her address this year. Her general theme was one of tolerance and of building bridges.

"Everyone is our neighbor, no matter what race, creed or color," the Queen says. "The need to look after a fellow human being is far more important than any cultural or religious differences."

The Queen pointed to Britain's multi-cultural heritage as a source of strength. But she warned that not everyone shares this view.

"There is so much to be gained by reaching out to others, that diversity is indeed a strength and not a threat," the Queen says. "We need also to realize that peaceful and steady progress in our society of differing cultures and heritage can be threatened at any moment by the actions of extremists at home or by events abroad."

In a separate radio broadcast relayed earlier Christmas Day to British forces based overseas, the Queen praised their peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts in places like Iraq.

"It has been a very demanding year," the Queen says. "I am proud of the way you have risen to the challenges with typical professionalism. The very tasks you take on in all parts of the world may be changing, but what remains the same is the spirit, good humor, courage and commitment you show every day, often in the most arduous conditions."

Despite the challenges ahead, the Queen said, there was every reason to be hopeful about the future. It is believed to be the first time in the Queen's 52-year reign that she has recorded such a message to troops at Christmas.

Britain is the second largest member of the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq, with approximately 11,000 troops concentrated in the southern part of the country.

In the United States, President Bush made Christmas Eve telephone calls to U.S. troops at home and overseas, thanking them for their service.