

DG/98/14

Original: French & English

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address
by Mr Federico Mayor

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the opening of the meeting
'Constructing the future: towards a culture of peace'
(Greek and Turkish journalists)

UNESCO, 12 May 1998

[The Director-General begins his speech in French]

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As Mr Janicot has just told you, I took the initiative of organizing this meeting after consultations with many people, including my friends Zulfu Livaneli and Costa Gavras. I have always believed in the power of the spoken word - particularly in the Mediterranean countries, in its potency as a means of communication. My friends convinced me that it would help to bring you all together here, under the auspices of UNESCO. This Organization, which is home to all peoples and all cultures, will be fulfilling its role if it helps you to take a look, together, at the historical and cultural links between your two countries, to appraise, together, the way in which you view each other, to try to dispel misunderstandings and create a climate in which the tensions can be eased. Even if the misconceptions are serious, deep-rooted, and of very long standing, even if there are many grievous wounds, we must not lose hope. Well-chosen words can accomplish a great deal.

Turkey and Greece have a distinguished role to play in UNESCO. It is vital you should know that. UNESCO has many tasks, but a single mission: peace. As we approach the end of the century, humanity may take pride in its progress, in science, technology, medicine and so on. Can it be as proud of its ethical progress? Obviously not. Communication technology no longer poses any problem (as the current vogue for mobile telephones demonstrates) but communication between humans is no longer so easy. We pay a very high price for violence and intolerance - millions of human lives. We must refuse to accept this price. That is why I am doing all I can to replace the logic of force with the force of logic, to replace the culture of war and coercion with a culture of peace, dialogue and understanding. It is time to give peace and non-violence a chance. War does not solve any problems, for it leads to further wars.

This meeting is in line with this new approach: to enable people to look at each other, to get to know each other and to talk to each other. As the twenty-first century dawns, the really big challenge is to stop relying on governments and begin to rely on peoples and individuals. After the devastation of the Second World War, those who founded the United Nations system, while still in shock from the horror of it all, had the amazing foresight to realize what was needed, and to open the Charter of the United Nations with the words: 'We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war . . .'. In this way, they transcended all attempts at institutionalization in order to prepare a different future for their children and ours.

Symbolically, the concept of a culture of peace is based on the fact that a lasting peace does not just mean the absence of war, but rather a dynamic process based on democratic principles. This is in fact in accordance with UNESCO's Constitution, which mentions, in particular, dignity, equality and mutual respect. You, as journalists, are in a better position than anyone else to understand this. Our Constitution goes on to say that peace, in order to be lasting, must be founded on 'the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind', and UNESCO's mission is to establish and reinforce peace through education, science, culture and communication. Article I says that UNESCO should 'promote the free flow of ideas by word and image'. Without communication and freedom of expression there can be no democracy, justice or peace. Article I also stresses that freedom of expression gives legitimacy to the rule

DG/98/14 - page 2

of law. In how many countries does law and order prevail, but in tandem with injustice and oppression? Was there no law in the Soviet bloc? It is worth saying again: laws can only be just when there is also freedom of expression, which you yourselves represent. As journalists, you are our hope, you play a pivotal role in achieving the freedom and legality which leads to justice.

Since it was established, UNESCO has dedicated itself to promoting and encouraging dialogue between different cultures and peoples, which is a basic element in any strategy to build and preserve peace. The role of journalists in this context is no longer in question, and I am therefore most grateful to you for having agreed to take part in this meeting. You have experienced painful times on both sides, in opposing camps. But beneath the surface of your opposition the substrates are very similar; your cultural roots are close. What an advantage! So many countries are searching for cultural roots!

We should describe the past as it really was; we cannot change it. But we must write the future as we would like it to be. If we have to describe the past, then we have to write the future, which is the only legacy that still remains intact. We can fill it with sharing, friendship and peace; it is up to us, as we approach the year 2000, which the United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed 'International Year for the Culture of Peace', to enable dialogue and co-operation to take over and men and women of goodwill to meet together to ease tension by their willingness to listen and to understand the other point of view.

[The Director-General continues his speech in English]

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Where better can that principle of constructive dialogue be translated directly into concrete action than in the media?

As journalists, you have the means to draw the world's attention to urgent problems like the growing gap between haves and have-nots. As we near the millennium, we must alert the world to the growing inequalities which are leading to poverty, misery, exclusion. I would very much like to see a genuine globalization of the economy and of communications. But instead of that, we have two poles, growing more separate than ever. We also have a complete lack of gender-balance at the decision-making level and very few women in positions of responsibility. On all these issues, you in the media can sound a warning and call for a new departure.

The media constitute a powerful, rapid and efficient tool. It is of course up to all of us, but firstly up to you, to make sure that tool is used well. Every story you cover, every report you write, every interview you conduct can carry the principle of constructive dialogue forward. It may be the perspective you take, the style you choose, the questions you ask or the stake-holders you include: journalists can create a framework of tolerance and understanding for the transmission of information. You are in the front line. So many people always remain spectators! During all my trips to the former Soviet Union from 1961, I always felt the immense sadness of the people's silence. It was the silence of those who were unable to speak. But now I am even more worried than before because there is the silence of those who can speak. Why are we silent now? It is a different kind of silence and this silence is worse than the silence of those that are unable to speak.

I have said very often to the scientific community, to the academic community, 'you are too silent, the decision-makers must be given elements for decision-making. They must know

what is happening in the world, from the social point of view, from the ethical point of view, from the values point of view'. We in academia cannot be silent. It is an effort that we must also make every day in UNESCO. We are not here for bureaucracy or for all the things that are in the management's hands. Our role is to denounce; our role is to defend freedom of expression, peace, justice and solidarity. If there is one profession that is at the forefront of this consciousness-raising, it is yours. We must defend freedom of information, the right to information that is a fair information. When we report, when we write and we sign, we carry responsibility. We must be very fair in reflecting as closely as possible the reality that we are describing.

We must defend journalists not only when they face flagrant violations of their rights but also when they face pressures of many kinds. We celebrated World Press Freedom Day on 3 May. So many journalists are killed because they are exercising their right to freedom of expression and some of them are under terrible economic, political and family pressures.

We attach great importance to the defence of press freedom and play an active role in promoting journalists' training, and in providing equipment and facilities for those who are in urgent need. When there has been conflict, the media are <instrumental in the process of reconciliation and reconstruction. We know from experience that after conflict, journalists are a vital factor for rehabilitation and development. Where there is the threat of conflict, the media can be instrumental in preventing its outbreak. Where there is latent tension, the media can start dialogue and build bridges of understanding.

I hope therefore that this space for dialogue here at UNESCO will allow new bridges to be built, will allow you, as experienced journalists, to have a memory of the future. I am so interested in the permanent challenge of the future that I have written a book that is entitled 'The Memory of the Future'. We always have memories of the past and, of course, we must always learn the lessons of the past. But what really matters is the past of the future in order to design a future different to the present.

I think, and you will certainly agree, that this encounter could lead to greater co-operation between the media of your countries; your initiatives could play a vanguard role and lead to greater co-operation in other domains. Greece and Turkey already take part in projects run by UNESCO. Students from both countries took a number of joint initiatives. By establishing new links - links of understanding and good neighbourhood - you will build a better future for yourselves, your families and your countries. Based on the results of this meeting, we will see how this initiative can be consolidated and complemented by a series of other activities, encounters and concrete projects you would like to suggest.

I can assure you that I will follow your meeting with great attention and that I will be particularly interested in the outcome of your discussions. Your initiatives will not only help to foster better relations between your own countries, but what is equally important for UNESCO, we can learn from the results of your meeting and apply the experience in similar cases.

I thank you very much for your attention and I wish you a very good meeting.