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

on the occasion of the presentation of the
Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize 1998

UNESCO, 24 September 1999
Mr President of the Republic of Senegal,
Mr President of the Republic of Côte d’Ivoire,
President Mário Soares,
Mr Representative of the President of the Republic of Guinea,
Mr Chairperson of the Executive Board,
Mr Chairman and Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury,
Laureates,
Excellencies,
Dear colleagues and friends,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to UNESCO for the presentation of the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize to Ms Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, and to Senator George J. Mitchell, former Special Adviser to the President of the United States for Irish affairs.

I am glad to see among you number H.E. Mr Abdou Diouf, President of the Republic of Senegal and sponsor of the Prize, who has once again come to demonstrate his attachment to those values that the Prize honours and rewards.

My thanks go quite naturally to the worthy successor of President Houphouët-Boigny, President Henri Konan Bédié, who has made the Prize one of his main concerns, and thanks to whom it has been reinforced in every respect since that Sage of Africa was taken from us.

Another reason why the Prize has itself become an international institution is its distinguished jury, which performs its role with great sagacity and with a clear, lofty vision of the present and the future. Allow us in that regard to pay tribute yet again to its Chairman, Mr Henry Kissinger.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The prize ceremony which brings us together this year honours two laureates, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and a United States Senator. On two sides of the world, our two prizewinners, Sheikh Hasina and George Mitchell, have worked for peace, applying the same principles and guided by the same vision of a peaceful, tolerant society.

I turn first to Her Excellency the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, daughter of the founder of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.
Your Excellency,

Following in the footsteps of your father, who dedicated his life to founding a nation, you in turn have taken that nation along the road of peace and reconciliation.

After the bitter experience of exile, you returned home and won the 1996 elections, becoming Bangladesh’s tenth Prime Minister. No sooner did you take up office at the helm of the nation, than you sought to end the conflict in the region of Chittagong where rebel forces had long since taken up arms.

You proceeded in a spirit of understanding and reconciliation, attentive to all the complexities of the situation, building up confidence in order to build peace. Finally, your untiring efforts were repaid: a quarter century of civil war in the region was ended with the signing of a peace accord on 2 December 1997. The five million inhabitants of that region can now look to a peaceful future and develop their communities free of the scourge of a conflict that many had experienced through their entire lives.

Madam Prime Minister,

Your peace-making efforts within your country’s borders have been matched by your dedication to the cause of a global culture of peace. Your commitment played no small part in furthering international support for a culture of peace.

I wish now to express my appreciation and thanks to Ambassador Anwarul Karim Chowdhury, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the United Nations, for the key role that he played in promoting a culture of peace at the United Nations.

At the request of the President of the General Assembly, Ambassador Chowdhury conducted the negotiations with the delegations in order to arrive at an agreed text of the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace, which was subsequently adopted by the fifty-third session of the General Assembly of the United Nations on 13 September 1999. This was a remarkable achievement for UNESCO and for the whole United Nations system.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I now pay homage to our second laureate, Senator George Mitchell.

Senator,

Before you played a pivotal role in the Northern Ireland peace process, you had already dedicated 15 years of office in the United States Senate to issues of social justice: promoting measures to protect children, low-income families and the handicapped, and defending the environment.

You brought to the seemingly intractable complexities of the situation in Northern Ireland a capacity for dialogue, a steady determination and a quiet confidence in the desire for peace within the divided community. Throughout the long and arduous negotiations, you played a critical role, patiently, steadily working towards reconciliation.

I believe your action will long remain a model and a reference in peace-making: you exemplify the role of the neutral outsider, which - as we saw - was an essential one in
Northern Ireland. The two key “insiders”, David Trimble and John Hume, were honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize last year. Today, it is with the greatest pleasure that we honour you with the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize.

[The Director-General concluded his address in French]

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On this, the tenth anniversary of the Prize, which is also the last time I shall be taking part as Director-General in the award ceremony, I am moved by the thought of the distance we have travelled since the first of these ceremonies, when Nelson Mandela and F.W. De Klerk shook hands on an international platform for the first time. A few months later, their efforts were to be crowned by the Nobel Peace Prize.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, may I take this occasion to pay tribute once more to the memory of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who was the first person through whom I came to know and love Africa. I also wish to thank Africa itself for teaching me so much.

It was in Africa that a woman, a primary school teacher, first fired at me the question: “Why do you always come here and tell us what to do? Why do you give us advice instead of listening to us?” We in UNESCO decided there and then that we would listen to Africa and to the world.

I would like here to express my special gratitude to Presidents Abdou Diouf and Henri Konan Bédié, and to many of their African peers. Their counsels have been most enlightening for me.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

President Félix Houphouët-Boigny wanted peace for all, rich and poor alike. That desire for peace has, like a dove, taken wing, flying out from Yamoussoukro to show the world the way towards an accession of solidarity, sharing, fraternity and love. Let us continue to strive to ensure that that dove has an easy flight and is everywhere welcomed with olive branches.