Award Ceremony of the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize
UNESCO, 6 July 1994

Address by Mr Henry A. Kissinger
President of the Jury

Distinguished Presidents,
Distinguished Prime Ministers,
Mr Director-General,
Distinguished Prize-winners,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

No region has produced more dramatic personalities and exalted visions than the Middle East. Its deserts punctuated by oases and stark mountains have been the origin of three of the world's great religions. Geography sets no bounds to the human imagination. Man is sustained above all by faith and the intangibles of human relationships. It has been an arena for prophets and for heroes. The line from what the rest considers empirical reality to passionate rhetoric and the policy of exaltation is easily crossed. In this cauldron, the conflict between Arabs and Israelis, and especially between Palestinians and Israelis, has festered for the better part of this century.

At first, Zionism and Arab nationalism, both products of the indignities suffered by their people, were not directed against each other. Only when the Ottoman Empire was replaced by the British mandate, and self-determination for Palestine came into view, did the Arab and Jewish peoples clash over the content and meaning of their truths. Having some experience with persecution in my youth, I have always felt for the Jewish yearning for a homeland, and our Israeli honourees have been valued friends of many decades. But as a historian, I can also understand that the territory whose mystique survived in Jewish hearts for two thousand years is unlikely to lose its hold over Palestinian hearts after but half a century.

In this spirit, I welcome Chairman Yasser Arafat, with whom I have been unable to communicate these many years, though it is safe to say we were not unaware of each other's activities. The vast heroic task before our honourees is to convert this shared dedication to the land of Palestine from a source of division into the impetus of reconciliation.
In the past, the conflict was intractable and the Cold War froze the stalemate without easing the passions. But it is the historic achievement of our honourees that they overrode, for this hopeful moment, the verities of distrust and fear of a generation of Israelis and Palestinians and that they have sketched a road-map towards peace which, if successful, will dwarf all previous achievements. The Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement, important as it was, provided for a buffer zone between the previous enemies. Yet, in Palestine, no buffer zones are conceivable. The parties are obliged to live together. Conflict has been their history. Coexistence and ultimately cooperation – we fervently hope - shall be their destiny.

Not enough tribute can be paid to Johan Holst, Foreign Minister of Norway, who facilitated the breakthrough and who is deeply missed. But the final credit must go to our honourees, Yitzhak Rabin, Yasser Arafat and Shimon Peres. They have made a leap of faith measured in the pain they must sometimes feel at the opposition they encounter from comrades in many previous battles. Nor can they themselves be totally free of the doubts that assailed not a few on both sides: is this agreement a genuine commitment or a tactic in a continuing struggle? Was it produced by exhaustion or by conviction?

The members of the Jury over which I had the honour to preside were only too aware of these ambiguities. But as we did when we awarded the Prize to Nelson Mandela and to De Klerk before they had completed their historic agreement three years ago, we chose to express our faith in the hopes of our honourees and in the dreams they expressed, not to second thoughts that they may harbour. Too many have died, too many hopes have been blighted for us to do less than to pay tribute to the best possible outcome. And we pay our honourees this expression of our respect and faith that they conclude what they have started so that at the end of the process the peoples of Palestine - Israelis and Palestinians- gain security, dignity and a harmony worthy of the biblical figures that bestrode their land; worthy, above all, of the suffering and faith that has brought all the parties this far and that we expect will inspire them the rest of the way.

So, if the Director-General will join me, I would like to award the Prize, the Houphouët-Boigny Prize, named after one of the great leaders of Africa and a close personal friend, to our three distinguished honourees.