Mr President Bédié, of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire,
Mr President Abdou Diouf, of the Republic of Senegal,
Mr Director-General of UNESCO, Federico Mayor,
Colleagues from the Jury,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great privilege for me to be able to give this award this afternoon. I had the honour of knowing President Félix Houphouët-Boigny when I was dealing with the issues of majority rule in Rhodesia, progress toward independence in Namibia, and majority rule in South Africa. I benefited from the goodwill and the support of many African leaders, including President Kaunda and President Nyerere, but nobody was a greater source of advice, and strength and wisdom than the President of Côte d'Ivoire. And, in those days, I also had the honour of getting to know that great poet and statesman, Léopold Sédar Senghor of the Republic of Senegal. So, for me, this Jury has been a personal commitment.

I would like to thank the members of the Jury. We meet every year - from different countries, speaking different languages, from different cultures, and we have several days of discussions. It is a tribute to the universality of human emotions and values that we have always come to a consensus and that we have never compromised. We have always come to a conclusion of which we could be proud and, if one looks at the names of the honourees, we can say they have fulfilled the highest hopes of the Prize founders.

The Director-General of UNESCO, an institution that does not always receive the kindest words from the United States, deserves our appreciation for the manner in which he
has made us feel at home here, has facilitated our deliberations and has created a framework worthy of the honourees.

Now, this year, the honours reflect a kind of problem that was not so well known and so much on people's minds when the Prize was first established. In those days, in those early days, when one thought of the culture of war, it was primarily in terms of traditional international conflict among nations. And the contribution to peace was defined as easing traditional international tensions.

But with the passage of years, a new, perhaps even more insidious, danger to human life and human dignity has emerged: ethnic, religious and cultural conflicts within nations. For these, there does not yet exist an international law and the remedies that democracy hopefully brings are also more complex. The democracies of Europe evolved in homogeneous societies where the minority had an opportunity to become a majority and where the shifting allegiances made electoral defeat tolerable. But in countries of ethnic conflict, the minority has very little opportunity to become a majority, at least not in the early stages, therefore these conflicts have been extremely bitter and bloody, and the response of the international community very often ambiguous and long-delayed. So our Jury concluded that, this year, we would honour two individuals who have made a seminal contribution to overcoming these essentially internal conflicts and who have inscribed their names in the annals of peace-making in what, twenty years ago, would not have been considered as strictly speaking international problems. For me, it is also a special privilege to give this award because Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is somebody whose family I have known for many decades; and because George J. Mitchell is an American, and it is of course a source of special pride to me that an award like this can be given to a fellow countryman – even when he belongs to a different political party than the one I represent!

I had the honour of meeting former President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first President of Bangladesh, shortly after he took office. I pointed out to his daughter that, prior to the election in what was then East Pakistan, we were told by the Government of West Pakistan that the people of Bangladesh were so divided that there would be twenty political parties and no outstanding personality. That prediction was so accurate that Sheikh Mujib emerged with 167 out of 169 seats in Parliament and became the Father of his country in an election that was really controlled by individuals very hostile to him – an extraordinary tribute to his leadership. The Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has lived up to the inspiration of her father. Our Jury has awarded her the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize because of her work in the negotiations with the rebel tribe populations in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, in the south-eastern districts of the country. A 68-point accord culminating intense negotiations acknowledged the autonomy of the Hill Tracts and reconciled the unity of the country with the dignity of the minority, the integrity of the nation and the human rights of its members. On 11 February 1998, the commander of the rebel forces surrendered his gun to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, thus officially marking the end of the rebellion.

I speak for our Jury when I tell you, Madam Prime Minister, that we are all proud to be able to extend this award to you.

I am married to a wife of Irish extraction who does not try to influence my own views. But she made one request of me when I entered the government. She said: “Never get involved in Irish questions! They are insoluble, the parties are too passionate and they won't tell you the truth of what they are really thinking”. I would like to say, first of all, that
George J. Mitchell deserves extraordinary credit for his courage in taking on an assignment that has defied solution through the centuries; which is overlaid with profound suffering; and in which each side is right from its point of view, which is precisely what makes the solution so complicated.

When I was a graduate student, then President Truman did me the honour of giving me an interview. When I asked him what he had done of which he was most proud, he said: “What I am most proud of is that we brought the nations with which we had been at war back to the community of nations as equals”. And I would like to think that this is one of the most important of America’s missions in the world.

Well, George, you have done your utmost to enable two heroic and conflicted societies to raise their sights from their quarrels and to rejoin the community of nations in its common task; and you have not only fulfilled the best aspects of what America can stand for, but what all of humanity is striving to achieve.

Inevitably, there will be ups and downs and nobody can expect a conflict of centuries to be ended with one document. But the Jury of the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize has great confidence that the final goal will be achieved, and is honoured to give you this award, as I feel privileged to be able to give it to you personally.

So now, if the honourees will come forward, I would simply like to say a few words common to both of them.

The task of leaders is to take their society from where it is to where it has never been. That requires strength of character and great courage, and we honour the two awardees today for precisely those qualities.