Award Ceremony of the
Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize
UNESCO, 24 September 1999

Address by Ms Sheikh Hasina
Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
1998 Prizewinner

Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim

Mr Henri Konan Bédié, President of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire,
Mr Abdou Diouf, President of the Republic of Senegal,
Mr Federico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO,
Mr Henry A. Kissinger,
Mr George J. Mitchell,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Ministers of my Cabinet and my Fellow Countrymen,

Assalamu Alaikum.

This is a moment of great honour for me, for my country and for my people. I am most thankful to UNESCO for showing us this honour.

May I congratulate Mr George J. Mitchell, the co-recipient of the award. We are well aware of his contributions to peace and believe that these well deserve to be congratulated.

I should like to offer my sincere thanks to the Director-General of UNESCO and Their Excellencies the Presidents of Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire for their kind words about me, my efforts for peace, and for my country.

The resolution of the problem in Chittagong Hill Tracts did not come in a day. When Bangladesh Awami League, my party, was in the opposition, it formed a research cell to go deep into the problem of Chittagong Hill Tracts and to suggest a possible solution. We came
to the conclusion that it was a political problem and must, therefore, be solved politically. Military and economic solutions were tried, with little success. As the leader of the opposition, I was the first to demand a political solution of the problem and asked for the setting up of a national committee with members of Parliament from both sides of the divide. It was formed, but failed to solve the problem. I believe we had a better luck simply because of our sincerity of purpose; Awami League is a people's party and was so ever since it was born. Securing the people's rights was always its only aim. We, therefore, thought that the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts must not be denied their rights. We tried to generate trust and friendship and, by the grace of Allah, succeeded in doing so. At the same time, we kept our efforts confined to the limits of the Constitution. We believe, viewing a problem in its right perspective, approaching it with a sincerity of purpose, creating an environment of trust and understanding and having the highest respect for the supreme law of the land, are basic to resolution and transformation of conflicts.

I would like to pay tribute to Mr Jyotirindra Bodhipriya Larma, the leader of the former insurgents in Chittagong Hill Tracts, now Chairman of the Regional Council, for his sagacity, wisdom and quest for peace. He surrendered his arm to me, so did his men. I gave a bouquet of flowers, of white roses, in return. That was an unforgettable moment. The world has not seen such a moment for long, certainly not in recent times. The refugees, who had gone across the border for fear of life or had remained in hiding within the country have all returned home under the leadership of Mr Upendra Lal Chakma. When refugees in many parts of the world continue to suffer and their problem gets increasingly difficult to handle, this certainly is satisfying. What is more important is the fact that the peace accord in Chittagong Hill Tracts was reached without any external help or mediation. It was our problem, we have, by the grace of Allah, solved it ourselves. We believe peace is within the reach of all people if they only truly wish to have it.

But many don't. I am sorry to come to this conclusion, but the conclusion seems inescapable. Those who produce and sell arms must have a market. Those who thrive on the might other than that of the people must have their ways of perpetuating it. But these are interest groups and interest groups, as we know them, hardly last forever. I am more worried about the common people whom they exploit. The common man does not even realize that he is brought up in an environment of malice and is fed on suspicion, hatred and enmity. This must end. Bangladesh has been trying to promote culture of peace in international forum including UNESCO and would continue to do so. The Hague Conference for Peace and Justice in the twenty-first century asked me to reach its message to all heads of government and I have done it. I have also made an appeal to them for introducing peace education at all levels. In Bangladesh, we have made a beginning in this regard and we hope to broaden its scope in the future. Peace is certainly attainable, but not without a culture of peace, nor without social and economic justice and equality. We must get rid of poverty and the woes that accompany it. We must have respect for human dignity. If we have that, we cannot permit a single man or woman, let alone children, to live in conditions that reduce human dignity and create a crippling environment. We have heard so much about human rights. To me, there are no human rights more important than the right to life free from poverty, disease, illiteracy and shelterlessness. This is what is peace. This is what we must attain, and not merely, a resolution or transformation of conflict.

In my own life, I have seen times when peace was seriously threatened. The first was in 1971 when we were obliged to fight our National Liberation War. The war could have been avoided easily if only the military rulers of Pakistan at the time had listened to the dictates of reason. The war was thrust upon us. In the general elections of 1970, the Awami League got
majority seats in the National Assembly of Pakistan under the leadership of our Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. But power was not transferred to him. The military junta of Pakistan unleashed a reign of terror instead and committed genocide, which took a toll of three million lives eventually. Our men, women and children were killed, thousands of women were raped. We were left with no choice but to take up arms. We saw the ugly face of a war.

    Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is my father. He is also the Father of our Nation. ‘Bangabandhu’ means the ‘Friend of Bengal’ He, along with my mother, my three brothers, the younger one was only ten, the newly wedded wives of my two brothers and most members of my family were brutally murdered on 15 August 1975 by some misguided army men. My sister and I escaped, since we were out of the country. We had to live in exile for many years, moving from one country to another and stalked by the fear of death at the hands of assassins all the time.

    After 1975, then came a long spell of military and authoritarian rule in Bangladesh. The rulers perpetuated themselves in power through farcical elections. There were several attempts on my life. But, I was not to be deterred from my goal of giving my people their right to vote and food.

    My commitment to peace arises from personal experience such as these. I know what war means, what authoritarian rule means and how people suffer when there are no peace and no democracy and people are rendered powerless.

    We had a long arduous struggle to establish people's right to vote and food. The main objective of our struggle is establishing people's democracy and economic emancipation. We launched a peaceful and constitutional movement to dislodge authoritarian rule. By the grace of Allah, we succeeded. We also restored to the people their right to vote freely and fairly and in accordance with their free will. It was made possible by moving an amendment to the Constitution providing for a non-party caretaker Government to conduct every general election. Now our struggle is to establish a society free from hunger and exploitation to fulfil the dream of our Father of the Nation for Sonar Bangla (Golden Bengal).

    During the movements, I was arrested several times. There were bullets shot at me a number of times to kill me. But the people are my strength. I am ready to make any sacrifice for my people's interest.

    There can be no peace without democracy. Only the other day, the Association of Asian Parliaments for Peace has been formed at the initiative of Bangladesh. We believe, what the representatives of the people can do to attain and sustain peace, no one else can.

    With all humility and gratitude to Almighty Allah, I accept the award with the hope that peace will reign all over the world in the next millennium, if not forever.

    Thank you all.

    Long Live Peace.

    May Bangladesh Live Forever.