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

Address by Senator George J. Mitchell
Former Special Advisor to the President of the United States of America for Irish Affairs
1998 Prizewinner

President Abdou Diouf of the Republic of Senegal,
President Henri Konan Bédié of the Republic of Côte d’Ivoire,
Director-General Federico Mayor,
Dr Henry A. Kissinger,
Madam Prime Minister,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to receive this Prize, especially in the company of the distinguished Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, whom I greatly respect and admire. Félix Houphouët-Boigny was a distinguished advocate for peace, an internationally renowned statesman who brought honour to his country and to his continent. A Prize bearing his name is a special tribute.

I accept this Prize with humility. Peace can never be the work of one person. It takes many people, usually working over many years. That is surely the case in Northern Ireland.

So I stand here today as a representative of the many men and women who have devoted their lives to the cause of peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. They include many public officials and private citizens, so many that I cannot name them all. But some deserve recognition.

The principal agents of the current peace process have been the governments of the United Kingdom and Ireland. Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern, and their predecessors, John Major, John Bruton and Albert Reynolds, led the way. They were assisted by many able public officials, including the British Secretaries of State Mo Mowlan
and Patrick Mayhew, and the Irish Foreign Ministers David Andrews, Ray Burke and Dick Spring.

The political leaders of Northern Ireland deserve credit. They acted with courage in a difficult and dangerous situation. David Trimble, John Hume, Seamus Mallon, Gerry Adams, John Alderdice, David Ervine, Gary McMichael, Monica McWilliams, and Malachi Curran led their parties to agreement on Good Friday last year.

Finally, and most importantly, the people of Northern Ireland. They are intelligent, energetic and productive. In May 1998, they voted decisively in favour of the Good Friday Agreement. In so doing, they made it clear that they are sick of war, and that they want peace, political stability and reconciliation.

They should be here. Since they are not, it is in their behalf that I accept this Prize. This is not the occasion for a detailed history of the troubles of Northern Ireland, or of the long effort to bring those troubles to an end. But I believe a few words are appropriate to establish the context for this award.

For decades, violence and fear settled over that beautiful land like a heavy, unyielding fog. Bombings, riots and assassinations hurt the economy. Unemployment rose, with violence, in a deadly cycle of escalating misery.

Finally, after years of effort, the British and Irish Governments were able to get peace negotiations underway in June 1996. At their invitation, I agreed to serve as Chairman.

It was the longest, most difficult negotiation I have never been involved with. Often, no progress seemed possible. But somehow, we kept going. One reason I kept going was the steadfast support and understanding of my wife, Heather. She is with me today and I would like to ask her to stand and be recognized.

There was an especially bleak and dangerous time in the Christmas season of 1997 and the months that followed. There was a sharp increase in sectarian killings; an effort by men of violence on both sides to destroy the process. Early last year, I concluded that a deadline for the negotiations was necessary if there was to be any chance of success. I decided on the Easter weekend.

In late March, I met with the participants in the negotiations: two governments and eight political parties. I recommended to them a final deadline of midnight, Thursday, April 9. They agreed. They wanted to reach an agreement. They recognized that there had to be a deadline to force a decision.

As we neared the deadline, there were non-stop negotiations. The Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom and Ireland, Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern, came to Belfast and showed true leadership. There would not have been an agreement without their personal involvement. During the night, President Clinton played a crucial role, calling several of the participants. Finally, in the late afternoon of Good Friday, we reached agreement.

It is important to recognize that the agreement does not, by itself, guarantee a durable peace, political stability, or reconciliation. It makes them possible. But there will have to be a lot of effort, in good faith, for a long time, to achieve those goals.
I hope the agreement will endure because it is fair and balanced. It requires the use of exclusively democratic and peaceful means to resolve differences, and it commits all of the parties to the total disarmament of paramilitary organizations. It stresses the need for mutual respect and tolerance between communities. It is based on the principle that the future of Northern Ireland should be decided by the People of Northern Ireland.

But we must acknowledge that full implementation of the agreement is far from assured. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the peace process is now under great stress. The devolution of power from the British Parliament to the new Northern Ireland Assembly has been delayed by the failure of the political parties to agree on some of the key aspects of implementation.

The situation in Northern Ireland is not unlike that once described by President Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Speaking in 1986, in another context, he said: “Our combat is not over. It will never be over. The real combat, the combat for peace, is still going on”. So it is today in Northern Ireland. The combat for peace is still going on.

At the request of the Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom and Ireland, I have returned to Northern Ireland. With the leaders of all of the parties there, I am conducting a review of the agreement.

As we have seen in other areas of conflict, getting an agreement is difficult. But then, gaining full compliance with an agreement is even more difficult.

It would be an immense and ironic tragedy were this process to fail. History might have forgiven the failure to get an agreement, since few thought it possible. But history will never forgive the failure to implement the agreement, once it was reached.

I hope and pray that the political leaders of Northern Ireland have the vision and courage to take the difficult steps necessary to move forward, toward a lasting peace.

I have been asked often whether there are lessons from Northern Ireland that may be useful elsewhere. Time does not permit me to fully answer that question. But I do want to mention one belief that was validated by my experience in Northern Ireland and that I believe to be universal.

I recall clearly my first day in Northern Ireland, nearly five years ago. I saw for the first time the huge wall which physically separates the communities in Belfast. Thirty feet high, topped in places with barbed wire, it is an ugly reminder of the intensity and duration of the conflict. Ironically, it is called The Peace Line.

On that first morning, I met with Catholics on their side of the wall, in the afternoon with Protestants on their side. Their messages had not been coordinated, but they were the same: in Belfast, they told me, there is a high correlation between unemployment and violence. They said that where men and women have no opportunity, no hope, they are more likely to take the path of violence.

As I sat and listened to them, I thought that I could just as easily be in the Balkans, or the Middle East, or indeed in any major American city. Despair is the fuel for instability and conflict everywhere. Hope and opportunity are essential to peace and stability. Men and
women everywhere need income to support their families, and they need the satisfaction of doing something worthwhile and meaningful with their lives.

The conflict in Northern Ireland is not exclusively or even primarily economic. It involves religion and national identity: the majority identify with and want to remain part of the United Kingdom, the minority identify with and want to become part of a United Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement acknowledges the legitimacy of both aspirations. And it creates the possibility that economic prosperity will flow from and contribute to lasting peace.

My most fervent hope is that history will record that the troubles ended on August 15 of last year in the small town of Omagh, where a huge bomb shattered the calm of a warm summer afternoon, killing twenty-nine people and injuring three hundred. I pray that this event was the last major spasm of a long and violent conflict. Amidst the death and destruction, there was laid bare the utter senselessness of trying to solve the political problems of Northern Ireland by violence. It will not work. It will only make things worse.

When the Agreement was reached, at about six o’clock on the evening of Good Friday, we had been in negotiations for nearly two years and continuously for nearly two days and nights.

We were elated and exhausted. In my parting comments, I told the delegates that the Agreement was, for me, the realization of a dream that had sustained me for three and a half years, the longest, most difficult years of my life. Now, I said, I have a new dream.

It is to return to Northern Ireland in a few years with my young son. We will roam the country, taking in the sights and sounds of that lovely land. Then, on a rainy afternoon, we will visit the Northern Ireland Assembly and sit quietly in the visitors gallery.

There, we will watch and listen as the members debate the ordinary issues of life in a democratic society – education, health care, tourism, agriculture. There will be no talk of war, for the war will have long been over. There will be no talk of peace, for peace will be taken for granted. On that day, the day on which peace is taken for granted in Northern Ireland, I will be truly and finally fulfilled.

In behalf of the peace loving people in Northern Ireland.

I thank you.