President Abdou Diouf of the Republic of Senegal,
President Henri Konan Bédié of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire,
Federico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO,
Jean Foyer, Vice-President of the UNESCO International Jury of the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize,
The Vice-President of the Gabonese Republic who came on behalf of El Hadj Omar Bongo,
President of the Gabonese Republic,
President Fidel V. Ramos of the Republic of the Philippines, The Honourable Members of the International Jury of the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize, Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Corps and other Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me commence my statement by extending to you the noble Islamic greeting “Peace be on you and the blessing of the Almighty Allah” and let me pay high tributes to the UNESCO in having wisely put up this Peace Prize, befitting the memory of the wise man who was considered by many as “the Sage of Africa”. By this act, UNESCO was able to respond to the felt-need worldwide to establish freedom strong foundation for quintessence of its mission in life and let me also express our sincere appreciation to Your Excellency, President Abdou Diouf, for patronizing and hosting this momentous occasion and too, for the warm welcome and generous hospitality extended to our entourage since arrival.

This is not our first visit to this great continent of Africa, nor yet to this beautiful city of Dakar and every time we come to this city, we are showered with utmost generosity and care from your goodself, Mr President, and the equally good people and Government of Senegal.
As a matter of fact, we would feel a pang of conscience should we fail to acknowledge, if only in passing, our people’s eternal gratitude to this great West African country and Your Excellency’s sagacious leadership for the invaluable contribution you generously and selflessly gave as keymember of the powerful quadripartite Ministerial Committee of the Six (MC-6). The brilliance and eloquence of Your Excellency and its equally powerful successor representatives in the crucial peace talks in the various parts of the world that preceded the signing of both the historic Tripoli Agreement of December 23, 1976, and the Malacañang Peace Agreement of September 2, 1996 have contributed a great deal to the final success of our collective and persistent endeavour to restore peace in Mindanao. Indeed, without such precious contribution, in concert with the other members of the OIC (Organization of the Islamic Conference)-MC-6, it would have been difficult not only to achieve the prevailing peace in our people’s homeland, but even much more so difficult to get the respect and commendation of the United Nations and the peoples of the world, like this present one. And this is not to mention either the equally brilliant role of your able representatives, specifically erstwhile Colonel Lamine Cissé, your present Minister of the Interior, in the implementation of the Organization of the Islamic Conference-brokered Ceasefire Agreement in January 1977-1978.

Mr President,

On behalf of the Bangsamoro people and the Moro National Liberation Front, the movement that spearheaded the nearly three decades of our people’s struggle for peace, justice and freedom, and on whose behalf I signed the September 2, 1996 Peace Agreement, we take extreme gratification in expressing to Your Excellency, Mr Federico Mayor, the Director-General of UNESCO, and Excellency, Dr Henry Kissinger, our abiding sense of gratitude for choosing me as one of the 1997 Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize laureates, along with H.E. Fidel V. Ramos, the President of the Republic of the Philippines.

The choice of President Ramos as a peace awardee is most deserving, if only because it was largely due to his wisdom and sagacity and enlightened policy vis-à-vis our people’s struggle that ensured the final success of the peace process and the steady consolidation of the peace and stability in our war-torn homeland.

According to the message of Dr Henry Kissinger, the decision of the International Jury of the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize, in unanimously awarding the Peace Prize to us, was in recognition of our contribution in forging the Peace Agreement that we signed at Malacañang Palace, Manila, on the 2nd of September 1996.

For it cannot be denied that this Peace Agreement has decisively put an end to the three decades of an indeed catastrophic war between the two bitter foes, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) freedom fighters and the armed forces of the Philippines. This is not to mention its myriad implications and consequences on the over four centuries of foreign-imposed aggression and war that our people had bitterly gone through off and on. Thus, we are delighted and overwhelmed indeed at the thought that our People’s struggle and their contribution to peace are now gaining the recognition they deserve even from such prestigious agency of the United Nations like UNESCO.

And we are humbled by the magnitude and immensity of the honour bestowed on us, although by this token you are actually extolling and enshrining the glorious struggle of our martyrs; who on the darkest hour of Philippine history had selflessly offered their sacred
lives to save the people and vindicate the cause of peace, justice, freedom and democracy in our people’s homeland.

In addition, Dr Kissinger also expressed his hope that this award will encourage the other rebel movements to join the path of peace. President Abdou Diouf in his eloquent message to this occasion, echoed the same appeal and sentiment.

This hope and this appeal are shared by many people everywhere. In fact, since the Peace Agreement was signed, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has been engaged in hectic peace negotiations with the Philippine Government, and, through our mediation, in response to the request of President Fidel V. Ramos, the MILF leadership has even gracefully signed a so-called “General Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities” with their counterpart in the armed forces of the Philippines.

And this has contributed immensely towards further consolidation of the peace and order situation in Mindanao and its islands, particularly in those isolated areas still known to be under MILF control and influence.

At this point in time, though, it is still too premature to say what exactly awaits them at the final end-game of their peace process. We can only surmise and join Dr Henry Kissinger and his colleagues in the International Jury in hoping that at the end of the day, the MILF and the Philippine Government will be able to succeed in their tortuous pursuit of the elusive peace between them.

Our firmness in wishing success in the on-going GRP (Government of the Republic of the Philippines)-MILF peace talk is prompted, among others, by our people’s genuine desire to see the enlargement of the dimension of peace in our homeland, for only then can we possibly create the political and economical conditions necessary to ensure our people’s prosperity.

Happily, since the advent of the Peace Agreement, there has been steady groundswell of popular support behind it. Consequently, the genie of war in Mindanao has apparently recoiled back to its bottle. Nevertheless, this should not be construed as a cause for complacency.

Far from that, on the contrary, we must exert every effort to add more impetus to the momentum of the peace by ensuring and expediting the full implementation of the Peace Agreement. Besides, we must hasten to introduce the necessary changes - with a view to making Mindanao eventually one of the most peaceful, progressive and prosperous parts not only of the Philippines but as well of Southeast Asia and the world.

The Bangsamoro people are determined and the youth are resolute in pursuing their dream of eventually making Mindanao, with all its vast richness, a real bastion of peace, justice, freedom and democracy. On the other hand, we must relentlessly pursue our campaign for further democratization of the Philippine political system, to enable the people of Mindanao to play an active role in the affairs of the national Government.

We believe that without just and equitable representation of the people, democracy is lost, because representation is essential in our contemporary democratic life. Denial of representation tantamounts to authoritarianism or dictatorship.
For this purpose we have launched the Mindanao Agenda demanding for necessary constitutional and legal changes, in order to ensure greater democracy and ample participation for Mindanao and its people.

We are happy to note that the new President has reaffirmed his pledge to undertake such constitutional and legal changes, by declaring his intention to carry out the Mindanao Agenda.

It goes without saying that, without genuine and functional democracy, it is impossible to attain complete success in the final implementation of the Peace Agreement. For without real democracy, the peace that we have achieved might not be able to sink its roots in the consciousness of the people and society. Hence it might stray away and become elusive and intractable again.

And for peace to be meaningful, it must have the barest minimum economic component. Otherwise, it is empty and hollow. Thus, we are thankful to President Fidel Ramos for helping us obtain modest funding for our program of reconstruction and rehabilitation.

In fine, we must succeed with the Peace Agreement, by installing genuine autonomy in Mindanao and its islands, with or without referendum. Such is the only option if it is our desire indeed to let the present peace stay on and linger forever in Mindanao.

In conclusion, allow me to reiterate our boundless and eternal sense of gratitude for the great honour that UNESCO Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize has bestowed on me and my most illustrious partner in peace, President Fidel V. Ramos, with the assurances that, with Allah’s mercy and guidance, we shall continue to faithfully build the impregnable monument to lasting peace in our homeland. Yes, we shall, Insha’Allah, work patiently for the final triumph of peace, justice, freedom and democracy in our homeland.

Thank you.