Address by Mr Fidel V. Ramos
President of the Republic of the Philippines
1997 Prizewinner

Of all the titles a public servant can aspire for, there is none greater than that of peacemaker. For peacemakers are particularly favored:

“Blessed are the peacemakers. For they will be called sons of God”. – Matthew 5: 9

That is why I am deeply grateful for this award that the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has bestowed on Governor Misuari and myself; especially since it bears the name of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who embodied for so many people humankind’s longing for peace and brotherhood.

But even as I thank you for this award, I must also say I can accept it only in the name of my fellow Filipinos and my country’s friends and well-wishers from many parts of the world.

I say this because in this century of conflict, peace, whenever it is achieved, is never the work of just one or a few individuals. It is always the collective achievement of many. And this was how it was in the case of the Peace Accord between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

For Filipinos who lived through this violent period of twenty-six years, there is of course no greater prize than the dawning of peace itself and the consequent flowering of development.
Because our peace process has stopped the fratricidal killings in our southern regions, it has lighted up many paths to a brighter future for our people.

The value of UNESCO’s yearly presentation of the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize is universally appreciated because it seeks to propagate a way for all mankind to rise above the conflicts that plague us. The Prize raises a beacon to all societies and nations embroiled in civil war, rebellion, insurgency and social violence.

It raises the hope that there is a way to end these conflicts other than by mutual extermination and this is the path taken by the statesman whose name this award bears.

As President Houphouët-Boigny declared: “There is no problem in the world, however difficult... that cannot be solved through negotiation”.

Subscribing to that same truth, we found peace in Mindanao, now being followed up with a focused development agenda. And we know others who seek peace will find peace in much the same way, by patient and creative negotiation.

The road to ending the armed struggle in Mindanao has been long, arduous and costly. Fortunately, we Filipinos did not have to travel that road alone.

On the road to peace, we received the help and encouragement of leaders around the world. Many times, the member-nations of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) provided the impetus that enabled us to press on when the going seemed toughest.

It is fitting that we should hold these ceremonies here in Dakar, for Senegal is one of the OIC’s Committee of Six (together with Indonesia, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh and Somalia), which tirelessly offered its good offices to ensure that, despite seemingly irreconcilable differences in their interpretation of the Tripoli Agreement, the dialogue between the warring parties continued.

With the OIC’s encouragement, the MNLF under Chairman Nur Misuari recognized the benefits of ending the conflict within the framework of a new Philippine Constitution. For its part, the Philippine Government also recognized the need in our multi-cultural society for the people to determine freely their political status and the way they would carry out the social and economic development of their respective communities.

This resulted in the setting up of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), a political concept written into our 1987 Constitution.

With the hospitality and good offices offered by Indonesia, our neighbour and brother in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the encouragement of the Committee of Six, the Philippine Government and the MNLF began to thresh out their differences in earnest starting in October 1992.

In those meetings, there were moments of tension and grave disagreement, moments that threatened to reopen the wounds inflicted by the years of conflict. But finally a Mindanao Peace Agreement was signed on September 2, 1996. Just three months short of a full twenty years since the Tripoli Agreement.
I remember receiving messages of congratulations from leaders of Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas. I recall with particular appreciation the message sent by UNESCO Director-General Federico Mayor, on September 3, offering UNESCO’s full support for the Southern Philippine Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD) that we set up to oversee the Mindanao Accord.

The equally difficult task of insuring sustainable development in the affected areas has become a top priority of Government because peace and development must go together.

Peace and development in Mindanao is the work of many good people, including those from other countries and, as Governor Nur Misuari and I accept this award from UNESCO, it is only proper that we acknowledge their help.

Peace, if it is to endure, must be much more than that. It must also be the means to the fulfilment of the hopes we share of lifting up the common life, and of winning the future for every Filipino.

In the Southern Philippines there is much more the two sides to the Peace Agreement must do, together, in union with all our countrymen.

The Peace Agreement also calls for setting up the political, economic and social institutions that will enable the people of Mindanao to decide by referendum the future composition of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

In the Southern Philippines, peace has also increased our chances of protecting our traditional cultures from the impact of globalisation. Peace makes easier the work of reinforcing the unity of our mixed communities, on which neighbourliness depends, against the spread of selfish opportunism. And the cohesive influence of Islam and ecumenism is helping to keep families, neighbours and communities together, despite the unavoidable inflow of foreign cultures and new technology.

In closing, let me summarize my people’s message to you.

New hope and new life have risen in Mindanao because, with the encouragement and staunch support of our friends in the world, we have found the courage to make peace as brothers.

Despite the trials of a long and costly conflict, we remained unswerving in our determination to seek peaceful solutions to the age-old problems in the Philippine South. And, when given the opportunity to break through, we seized the opportunity to win the peace.

In the larger historical context, I am proud to say that the Filipino people have taken up the burdens of peace as bravely as they had taken up the burdens of conflict. And I am confident we Filipinos will continue to bear this responsibility of keeping the peace, for we know only too well the terrible costs of conflict.

We have come to realize we cannot develop separately, as ethnic groups or political factions or diverse cultural communities or economic classes isolated from one another.

We Filipinos have come to realize that, as a multi-ethnic society, we can develop only as one country and one people.
And we have learned, painfully, the lessons of our history, even as we continue to learn from the history of other people.

Filipinos have been through the entire spectrum of bloody conflict during the past one hundred years.

On the other hand, the Philippines claims credit for the first peaceful non-violent people power revolution that toppled a dictatorship in our part of the world. This act of the sovereign people, supported by a democratically-oriented military, showed the peace-loving character of Filipinos to the world in February 1986.

We have survived all these vicissitudes and our democracy has now emerged more stable and united than before.

To us Filipinos, the higher significance of this 1997 UNESCO Peace Award is that it comes at this particular time, almost to the day, of our centennial of Philippine independence of our 100th year of nationhood as Asia’s first Republic. The UNESCO Peace Prize therefore adds greater luster to the legacy of freedom we leave to future generations of Filipinos.

Mr President, Members of Jury, Mr Federico Mayor, thank you once again for this great honour from UNESCO and this wonderful award ceremony hosted by Senegal in the presence of the leaders of Africa. This Peace Award you have bestowed on Governor Misuari and me and our fellow Filipinos, we will cherish always and especially the memory of the great African statesman in whose name it is being given.

Thank you.