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"All Different, All Equal: From Principle to Practice"

**Speech by Mary Robinson,
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and
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Secretary General,
President of the Parliamentary Assembly,
President of the European Parliament,
Fellow Speakers,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,

Little did I imagine, when I addressed a preparatory conference of the Council of Europe in 1993, before the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights – which led to the creation of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights - that I would return in this capacity for another preparatory conference! It is an honour and a real pleasure to be back ...

This Conference, appropriately entitled "All Different, All Equal: from Principle to Practice", is important on two grounds. It is an important event in itself in that it places a necessary and timely focus on the serious problem of racism and xenophobia in Europe. And here I would like to commend the initiative of fully involving non-governmental organisations in the work of the Conference. Civil society's participation is vital in the fight against racism and xenophobia. Additionally, this is the first of a series of regional conferences taking place in advance of the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance which will be held in South Africa next September. On both grounds it is vital that this Conference be productive and forward-looking, and that it sends out a strong signal that Europe is determined to fight the evil of racism.

Recognising the Scale of the Problem

An essential starting point is to recognise the scale of racism and xenophobia in Europe today. We cannot and should not be blind to what is happening around us. Manifestations of racism and xenophobia are now commonplace. The most glaring ones make the headlines – an arson attack on a hostel for asylum-seekers, a particularly savage racial murder. But there are plenty of

statistics to show that these are just the tip of the iceberg. Recent arson attacks on synagogues in Erfurt and Düsseldorf are just the most glaring examples of more widespread attacks against the Jewish community in Germany. Racist attitudes in communities, and incidents of institutionalized racism in police, immigration and prison officers, are on the rise throughout Europe.

In some ways the problem is the same as it ever was: hatred based on fear – ; fear of economic competition, fear of loss of identity. In other ways, the patterns of modern racism are worryingly different. We need to pay particular attention to gender and racism, and recognise the double discrimination which can occur.

The persistence of racism in Europe is attested in the reports of the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and in the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance. We should acknowledge, too, the courageous efforts of NGOs and individual journalists to highlight the root causes and problems.

I believe it is important not to stereotype - and thereby somehow distance ourselves from – those we would characterize as racist. Instead, we must look within us – look around at our own families – and acknowledge honestly the seeds that lie hidden within, and about which we must be eternally vigilant.

Among the general aspects which should be noted are:

- An overall increase in intolerance towards foreigners, asylum seekers and minorities.
- ill-treatment of members of minority groups by police, immigration and other officials.
- Discrimination in the workplace and the service sector.
- More people prepared to openly acknowledge that they hold racist views. One survey put the number of French people describing themselves as racist at 38%, with 45% of Belgians, 23% of Germans and 22% of British people placing themselves in the same category.
- A rise in support for political parties espousing far right causes: Austria, Switzerland and Belgium being examples.
- The emergence of racist attitudes in societies where it had not been so evident before: Finland, Spain and Ireland, for example.

These trends are alarming and Europeans should wake up to the threats they pose. The fact that racist attacks and discrimination are being recorded in wealthy countries, where there is no threat to livelihoods from refugees and asylum seekers, is a worrying new dimension.

These trends are also reminders of the solemn responsibility which Europe bears to lead the fight against racism. Over the last century Europe has experienced the worst excesses of racism and xenophobia. The Holocaust will stand forever as a warning of where anti-Semitism, racial hatred and the demonisation of those perceived as different ultimately leads. And, in case anyone should have thought that such horrors could never happen again, we have only to consider the mass killings, rapes, torture and expulsions over the past decade in the Former Yugoslavia.

This Conference provides the opportunity to take stock of the problem of racism and to devise strategies to combat it. We can only do that by first accepting that Europe has a serious problem, and by seeking to understand the nature and sources of the problem.

Fortress Europe

In looking at racism in Europe there is one very significant aspect which must be addressed, and that is the development of what has been described as Fortress Europe. In this context a true analysis points to the reality of two Europes, increasingly divided by a Brussels-made wall.

The gulf between the rich and the poor in the world is ever widening. Africa, in particular, is experiencing extremes of poverty and exclusion which should shame the developed world into action. But the tendency these days is for developed countries to turn away from the problem. ODA flows are falling, debt relief strategies are inadequate, the international trade system continues to be heavily weighted in favour of the rich. It is as if many in the developed countries have decided to settle for a world divided between haves and have-nots, and that the priority must be to protect what they have at all costs. The image of a fortress is appropriate: the sense is of the gates being locked, the drawbridge being drawn up and everyone who is left outside being allowed to starve and die.

Western Europeans must beware of the fortress mentality. Economically, it is not a sustainable approach in the long term. Demographically, the population of Western Europe is aging fast. Morally, it cannot be right that millions go hungry, live without clean water or even basic medicines, die of AIDS, at a time when people in the developed countries enjoy unparalleled prosperity, standards of healthcare at an all-time high, access to the most sophisticated technological advances.

Responsibilities of Politicians

Who has the power and the responsibility to effect change? A heavy duty rests on the shoulders of national governments and politicians. To be honest, I see a lot of scope for improvement. Strategies to tackle racism in Western, Central and Eastern Europe should be coming from the top, from Europe's political leaders. Yet the impression is that it is racists and bigots who make the running in the debate, and that some politicians remain silent for fear of antagonising the few. As Edmund Burke said, "For evil to triumph it is sufficient that good men are silent".

Politicians should lead by example. This is an issue which calls for a strong stance and a transparent approach. Some leaders have had the courage to speak out clearly and show solidarity with victims of racially-motivated attacks. We need more of that - and not only after outrages are committed. We need to hear our political leaders championing diversity, extolling the virtues of multicultural, multi-ethnic societies, defending the vulnerable.

Europe has benefited greatly over the past fifty years from leaders of vision who have determined to move away from past hatreds. I think of Willi Brandt's gesture of atonement

in the Warsaw Ghetto, the far-sightedness of the architects of the Treaty of Rome, the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights. On the world stage, I think of the determination of those post-war leaders who drafted the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Genocide Convention. I think of the courage and magnanimity of Nelson Mandela. We must seek to recapture the spirit that moved those leaders to seek to make the world a better place for all, irrespective of race, gender or religion.

We can and must do better in the fight against racism and xenophobia. A sustained effort needs to be made at national, regional and international level.

National Measures

At national level, as I have said, I believe that more could be done by governments and political leaders. A serious impediment to tackling the problem occurs where there is broad denial in a country that racism or xenophobia exist at all. Facing up to the reality of the existence of the problem is an important step forward. To tackle it, a wide range of legislative and administrative instruments is available.

A key area is education. While the persistence of racist attitudes is a complex issue, we do know that ignorance and lack of information are root causes. The more that can be done to educate people about the fundamental importance of respecting the rights of others, the better the chance there will be of conquering prejudice. More resources should be put into education and it should be accorded the high priority it deserves. Surely we can use the opportunities provided by the information revolution to spread the message of the oneness of mankind, of the value of respect, tolerance and good neighbourliness.

Another thing that governments should do is to make full use of the international human rights instruments, and in particular the International Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. The two members of the Council of Europe which have not yet done so - Ireland and Turkey - should ratify the Convention. All should regard the reporting process to the CERD as a positive process which will improve their capacity to combat racism.

And best practices should be followed. Of many such examples, two are worth mentioning. Sweden, as part of its highly developed structure of national institutions, has an Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination who places an important emphasis on the employment sector. Given that discrimination so often manifests itself in the workplace, such emphasis can help to shed light on a crucial area.

In Hungary, the Parliamentary Commissioner for National and Ethnic Minority Rights has been active in promoting and protecting the human rights of minorities. One focus has been on the need to put racial discrimination and obstacles to integration of minority communities into curriculum development within educational institutions. Another aspect which the Parliamentary Commissioner has stressed is the importance of addressing minority rights issues not only at federal level but at provincial/departmental and municipal level – where much more awareness raising is required. I got this message very

strongly in Prague recently, when I heard concerns from NGOs about the treatment of the Roma community by local officials.

Of the many actions governments should take to combat racism and xenophobia, there are three which I would single out today for special attention: a more sympathetic approach to asylum seekers, tackling contemporary forms of slavery and ensuring respect for the rights of minorities.

Western Europe's very high level of prosperity makes it inevitable that it will continue to attract asylum seekers and refugees in large numbers. The movement of population from poorer to richer areas is a worldwide trend and it is not about to go away. This is a challenge which should be met with generosity of spirit and respect for the inherent dignity of every human being. But the sense I have is that a generous response is not forthcoming - quite the contrary.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has pointed out that the alarming increase in racist attacks on asylum seekers and refugees subjects them to a "continuum of intolerance". The picture is grim: it is intolerance or aggravated discrimination which forces them to leave their countries; intolerance, rejection and abuse which they face along the treacherous road to safety; and, once they have reached a place where they are entitled to expect adequate protection, they are met instead by, at best, suspicion, at worst rejection and physical violence.

The term "asylum seeker" has even become in some countries a term of abuse. Asylum seekers find themselves doubly stigmatised – as "aliens" and as "cheaters", if not "criminals", for no other sin than having entered "Fortress Europe". In public opinion and political discourse there is a disturbing tendency to criminalise asylum seekers, notably by linking their search for protection to the questionable methods of smugglers and traffickers. Some parts of the media have played a very negative part by whipping up hysteria over these issues. This is a dangerous identification of victims with wrong-doers which should be firmly resisted.

Of no less concern is the rise in contemporary forms of slavery and the related issue of trafficking in people. The hundreds of thousands who leave their homes in search of a better life are vulnerable on many fronts, especially if their situation in the host country is irregular. Women and children are the most vulnerable of all. If undocumented, they can become prey to callous, unscrupulous people who force them to work in conditions that amount to forced labour or slavery.

The problem of trafficking is world-wide and growing. It is estimated that between 300 and 600,000 women are smuggled each year into the European Union and between and from Central and Eastern European countries. Human trafficking is a violation in itself but it can include violations of a whole range of human rights. Poverty, discrimination and social exclusion are the backdrop for trafficking; it is a phenomenon which destroys thousands of lives and governments throughout Europe should be paying more attention to it.

Every country in Europe includes minorities of one kind or another – be they members of minority nationalities, religions or ethnic groups, indigenous peoples, Roma or Travellers. The protection of minorities and other vulnerable groups was the subject of a regional seminar organised by my Office in preparation for the World Conference against Racism. At the seminar, held in July in Warsaw, a series of questions was put. How can disparities in access to economic and social opportunities be eliminated so that root causes of prejudice and discrimination can be removed? How can countries establish institutions to monitor themselves so as to detect potential problems in time? How can every country visit and recast its vision of a national identity that embraces and encompasses all parts or groups of the population, that gives to everyone a stake in the future of her or his country?

These are issues which will be pursued vigorously as we prepare for the World Conference. In this I am mindful of the fact that the United Nations has made the protection of minorities one of the central purposes of its human rights programme and that there is a special duty of care on us to protect the rights of these vulnerable groups.

Regional Activities

At the regional level, Europe as a whole is well placed to give a lead in the fight against racism and xenophobia. The institutions to protect human rights in this region are among the oldest and most sophisticated in existence.

- I would like to pay tribute to the Council of Europe for the solid contribution it has made and continues to make. Lord Russell Johnston put it succinctly in a lecture delivered on the 50th Anniversary, pointing out that: "The Council of Europe's myriad of legal and political achievements now affects every possible aspect of our citizen's lives".
- The reports of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance provide an important yardstick by which countries can measure progress made and identify what has to be achieved.
- I pay tribute also to steps taken by the European Union to combat racism and discrimination and note the establishment of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia and the recent Directive implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial and ethnic origin, adopted by the Council of the European Union, in Luxembourg 29 June 2000.
- The European Youth Campaign against Racism and the European Year against Racism were important in that they engaged people's attention to issues of racism. It is vital that we bring young people on board. Children, it is often said, are colour blind – we must find ways of trying to extend that acceptance of difference beyond childhood.
- I pay tribute, too, to the work of the OSCE's High Commissioner on National Minorities who has done a lot through quiet diplomacy to impress on governments the need to give fair treatment to all minorities.

I think it is important, as European institutional arrangements to tackle racism are developed, that attention be paid to complementarity between the different mechanisms. This is something for the institutions themselves to consider but it is as well to remember

that the fight against racism is a common cause and resources should be used to best advantage.

There is an immediate role which everyone in Europe can play and that is to participate fully in next year's World Conference against Racism. This Conference can send a strong political signal of Europe's determination to play an active role in the build-up to the Conference and the Conference itself. I certainly hope you will do that.

Looking ahead to the World Conference

The World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance provides the international community with an ideal occasion to start this new century by stepping up the fight against racism.

The preparations are fully under way. In addition to the seminar on minorities in Warsaw I have mentioned, there was a regional seminar in Bangkok last month on migration and trafficking in persons. Last week, I participated in the African regional seminar which considered the important theme of the prevention of ethnic and racial conflicts, and a regional seminar in Santiago de Chile later this month will focus on "Economic, social and legal measures to combat racism with particular reference to vulnerable groups"

This European regional conference will be followed by regional conferences held, respectively, for the Americas in Chile in December, for Africa in Senegal in January and for Asia in Teheran in February.

Our hope is that these preparatory events will cover the whole range of issues associated with racism and discrimination and will feed the results into the deliberations of the World Conference itself.

Let me say something about the kind of World Conference I want. But first I will tell you three things I do not want it to be. I do not want a talking shop with fine words and no substance. I will insist on an action-oriented meeting with specific follow-up and review provisions. I do not want it to be a forum where one part of the international community abuses another. Racism is bad wherever it shows its ugly face and no country or region can claim to be free of it. And I do not want the World Conference to be hijacked by narrow sectional interests.

What I would like to see is each nation examining its record in improving relations between the elements and groups which make up their society. I would like everyone to face up to the origins of racism and discrimination, to come to terms with the legacy of history, including slavery, pogroms, the brutalities of colonialism, genocide. I hope there will be a particular focus on issues of gender and racism. And I would like it to strengthen our resolve to reshape our identity in the modern world as inclusive, multicultural, multiracial communities where everyone is treated on an equal footing.

At the Millennium Summit in New York I circulated a Visionary Declaration for the World Conference which has now been signed by 58 Heads of State and Government.

My aim was to state a self-evident, but often forgotten, truth: that we all constitute one human family. The Visionary Declaration refers to the first mapping of the human genome, an extraordinary achievement which not only reaffirms our common humanity but promises transformations in scientific thought and practice, as well as in the visions which our species can entertain for itself. It encourages us towards the full exercise of our human spirit, the reawakening of all its inventive, creative and moral capacities, enhanced by equal participation of men and women. And it could make the twenty-first century an era of genuine fulfillment and peace.

The Visionary Declaration calls on us, instead of allowing diversity of race and culture to become a limiting factor in human exchange and development, to refocus our understanding, discern in such diversity the potential for mutual enrichment, and realise that it is the interchange between great traditions of human spirituality that offers the best prospect for the persistence of the human spirit itself.

Europe has the capacity to play a major part in this great enterprise. Do not let it be said that you were found wanting.

Thank you.
