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Legge: Rosady T = 51324

Yusufi

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Address by Mr. Ruud Lubbers, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to the Nobel Peace Prize Centennial Symposium (Oslo)

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It is an honour to address this symposium. This gathering of Nobel Peace Prize Laureates has an important role to play in defining a way forward for humanity.

UNHCR has received the Nobel Peace Prize twice. First, in 1954, for its work in finding solutions for refugees who were still homeless in the aftermath of the Second World War; and then in 1981, for its role in managing the Vietnamese refugee crisis.

In the more than five decades of UNHCR's existence, the refugee problem has not gone away. On the contrary, refugees remain a potent symbol of the world's failure to put an end to war and persecution.

In its 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN General Assembly affirmed that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. The Declaration proclaims that no one should be held in slavery or subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. All are held to be entitled to equal protection of the law, to move about freely, to found a family, to own a property, to express their views, and to practice their chosen religion. All are held to be entitled to an adequate standard of living, employment, education, and health care.

In the years since 1948, governments have adopted many instruments to attain these fundamental human rights. Despite this, gross violations of human rights continue to be perpetrated in numerous countries. War, genocide, persecution, political repression, "ethnic cleansing", terrorism and abject poverty continue to deprive individuals of their homes, their families, their work, their schools, their places of worship, and their access to education and health care. Millions of people are deprived of their liberty, security and dignity.

As High Commissioner for Refugees, today there are some 22 million people of concern to me. This includes refugees, internally displaced persons and stateless people. These are all people who do not benefit from the protection of their own government. For more than fifty years, my Office has worked to protect and assist such people – the dispossessed of the Earth. It is a lonely battle, and the numbers are not becoming smaller. Like so many others who are battling to reduce poverty, to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic, to preserve the environment, to ensure respect for Nature, to put an end to violence and conflict, and to build more democratic and inclusive societies, I am constantly reminded of how powerless we are.

I am concerned that globalization has been an unguided, leaderless phenomenon that has left millions of people with no immediate apparent benefits. Yes, it has increased global wealth, but it has also diminished the value of traditional cultures and ways of life, it has opened up old wounds,

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and it has created a new set of injustices that breed violence as well as political and religious extremism. I am an economist, but I am convinced that we cannot go on with the pure economization of life, where everything is measured in terms of money and the capacity to generate wealth. I am convinced that humanity needs a common agreed ethical framework.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted more than fifty years ago as a basic condition for democratic societies, democratic nations, and united nations. This was a significant step forward for humanity. It then took decades to overcome colonialism, and we had to go through the long years of the Cold War until the world arrived at a general acceptance of the need for open, non-totalitarian societies. But in spite of all this progress, in places where people are poor and national economies are weak, the environment continues to suffer; and where the environment is abused and resources are over-consumed, people suffer and economies decline. ↓

An integrated vision of the different challenges that we face would help to guide us towards a better future. Environmental challenges form an indivisible and inseparable relationship with human rights, social justice, democracy and peace. The failure to recognize the links between each of these has weakened our response. Today's institutions of global governance deal with each of these issues separately. One of our biggest challenges now is to come to a better understanding of the inter-relationship of the various components needed to ensure a more just and peaceful world.

Separate and fragmented efforts will not take us forward but will leave us directionless. I believe we need an ethical framework that links the arts, sciences, religions, educational institutions, the media, businesses, non-governmental organizations, multilateral organizations and governments in the search for a common destiny. This will require individual resolve and a consciousness of our belonging to one single human family. It will also require a willingness to implement the necessary institutional changes.

To break this vicious circle, we must support the extended agenda of the Earth Summit and its plan for worldwide action on the environment and poverty. We must go beyond ensuring respect for human rights, by also ensuring good business ethics and by promoting responsible business. We must also help to guide and empower civil society to bring about change. Governments have shown themselves to be unable to resolve problems on their own. Civil society must speak up for its beliefs and be part of creative solutions. Business must no longer insulate itself as outside the scope of values of human conduct. In this globalized world, where more and more voices are being heard, and where business and governance are becoming more global, a common ethical framework should ensure cohesion between governments, civil society and business.