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IN THE CHAIR: MR KLEPSCH
President

Award of the Sakharov Prize to the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo"

PRESIDENT. — (DE) Ladies and gentlemen, the European Parliament established the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in order to honour people and institutions who have courageously and resolutely defended human rights and the values of democratic society. The recipients of this prize are an example and an encouragement to all those anywhere in the world who — sometimes under very difficult circumstances — are trying to establish a world order based on the principles of democracy, basic rights and fundamental freedoms.

From its very outset the European Community has regarded respect for human rights in the framework of a democratic society as a fundamental element. This principle is a key element in the Community's identity and serves as a guideline for its foreign policy with third countries.

The European Parliament, particularly since the first direct elections in 1979, has given this conviction concrete expression through many initiatives, activities and debates. I recall the decisive impetus given by the Declaration on Human Rights which the twelve Member States adopted in 1986. A further significant example is the European Parliament's latest Declaration on Racism and Xenophobia.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are highly honoured to welcome here today Mrs Bonafini, Mrs d'Alessandro, Mrs Cerruti and Mrs Ramirez Abella. They represent all Argentine mothers who by founding their organization, the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo", drew attention to their plight and to the intolerable goings-on in their country, which came as a great shock to the outside world. In so doing they showed extraordinary courage and helped through their unflagging energy to bring about an end to these terrible abuses. The Republic of Argentina, which had in the past enjoyed a long tradition of democracy, endured under a bloody military dictatorship from March 1976 to December 1983 one of the bitterest periods of its history.

During this period of state-run terrorism by the army junta, the increasing social unrest in Argentine society was suppressed by force and a genuine reign of terror was instituted. Opponents of the regime were stripped of legal protection and oppressed, in flagrant breach of all moral values. A for us inconceivable number of people simply "disappeared" without trace.

In this darkest period of repression world attention was drawn to a few defenceless women. In April 1977 they had the courage to stand up to their oppressors and proclaim to the world that their sons and other close relatives had disappeared: they had been openly arrested

or secretly snatched, and nothing was heard of them afterwards.

Since then these women have demonstrated on the Plaza de Mayo every Thursday with white handkerchiefs in their hands on which are written the names of their relatives who have disappeared in this dirty war. ~~Such a demonstration is indeed taking place today at the same time.~~ By this action the Mothers bear witness to their belief and attract worldwide recognition, since they are defending not only their own relatives but also justice and the human rights of people throughout the world.

The words of Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel apply to this testimony: "A genuine and lasting democracy cannot be built on a basis where justice is lacking and crimes go unpunished, since the future is determined by our courage to shape the present."

Argentina has restored democracy and the rule of law, and we have resumed and developed our traditional friendly relations with it. In the spring of this year, President Menem spoke in this Parliament of the new developments and the present state of our relations.

These new developments in Argentina are in part the result of what the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" have done; but their efforts have been directed not only at re-establishing democracy, but also, beyond that, at achieving justice for all.

The European Parliament pays tribute through these Mothers to the entire Argentine people and to all the peoples of Latin America who have resolutely sought to bring about democracy and freedom in their countries.

Before I award this Prize I should like to invite Mrs Hebe de Bonafini, the chairwoman of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, to say a few words to us.

I should also like to take this opportunity to express my concern and that of many Members of this Parliament at the situation of Mrs Aung San Suu Kyi, who received the Sakharov Prize in 1990. She is still under house arrest in Burma. She is believed to be on hunger strike and her state of health has deteriorated. In agreement with the competent authorities of this House I shall once again do all within our power to press for her release and safety.

And now may I invite you, Mrs Bonafini, to address this House.

(Applause)

BONAFINI. — (ES) Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, we accept the prize with which you are honouring us on behalf of our children, who were the first to struggle for freedom, and we wish to share it with all those who have believed in our struggle and who are accompanying us today — many of them from the gallery of this Chamber: the women from the Netherlands, who were the first to form a support group, who are here today; the women who formed the Solma Group in France; and all the

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support groups and each and every person who has believed in our struggle. With them we wish to share this prize.

My country is passing through difficult times today. We, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, have been engaged in a struggle for 15 years, more than 15 years — going to the square every Thursday. At this very moment, our comrades in Argentina are marching round the square, and we too, in this Chamber which is also a circle, feel as if we are marching — marching towards a future which we want to be a better one and for which we are struggling.

In my country, there is a great deal to do. We will never get our children back, but we feel as if they were still alive. We feel as if they were still alive, because they showed us the path of solidarity and struggle. We feel that every day our children are encouraging us to grow ever stronger and not to give up. Many people wonder why we still go to the square. We want the young people of our country to become involved in politics, to feel that action is necessary, to fight to transform a shameful and oppressive system, a system that leaves us without work, education or health care.

All year, we have been holding workshops in the campaign for education, public health care, a free press and the new trade unionism. We have been holding workshops with young students, who do not want a new system of fees to be introduced in the universities, because it will mean they are unable to study. We are constantly working together with the men and women of our country who go on strike solely to protest at unemployment. In my country, there is a great need for work and a great lack of work. We believe that the lack of work and the lack of housing constitute serious abuses of human rights. We want to make the campaign for work, housing, health care and education part of our struggle, because although it is true that we originally came together to look for our missing children, and that our children were abducted because they challenged the imposition of a terrible economic system, it is also true that in my country, a child dies of starvation every 20 minutes, and 36 children die for lack of medical attention every day. We believe that this is a tremendous abuse of human rights, and as long as there are still men without work or housing, as long as there are still women who give birth without knowing whether their child will live or die, we shall continue to march around the Plaza de Mayo: the square in which our movement was born in such terrible and difficult times; the square in which we were arrested so many times; the square from which our comrades, founders of our movement, were abducted — and at this point I should like to dedicate this prize to them...

(Applause)

... Azucena Villaflor de Vincenti, Esther Balestino de Cariaga and Mari Ponce, who were abducted because they were looking for their children, and who also have never been heard of again. We have ever more reason to gather in the square. We have ever more need of your support. I thank you for awarding us this prize, which will give us strength, and the acceptance of which commits us to continuing the struggle. We want, and we intend, the struggle for life, the struggle against death and in spite of death, to have no frontiers and to be above race and religion. Life is humanity's most precious gift, and it

seems that this has been forgotten in the countries of Latin America. And it has been forgotten, because the repression is still going on, because the repressors are still in positions of power, because the murderers of the armed forces are still in the armed forces and are continuing to murder young people today.

The acceptance of this prize, as I said before, implies a commitment — a commitment to all the young people of Argentina who follow our actions, and who see in us a ray of light. We want to show them that to be politically active, with principles and a sense of morality, is the finest thing a man or woman can do. We want our young people to be enthusiastic, to organize themselves, to fight for what they want. Our young people are tired of being betrayed, of being sold to the highest bidder; they are tired of the fact that it is always their blood which is spilt. We are engaged in a non-violent but vigorous campaign — a campaign imbued with the principles that first brought us together — on behalf of our missing children who, today, 15 years on, are 15 years older. We have given them 15 more years of life. For us, there can be no recompense, no money can replace our children. The only possible consolation can be if one day the judiciary sends the murderers to prison. That is what, slowly but surely, we are working for. Every day, information is brought to our office — where they are, where they live, who pays their salary — and we are gathering this information together. Last year, they entered our office three times, breaking all our equipment and destroying all our files. And we started all over again. Thanks to the support we received, we were able to reassemble all the information that had been stolen from us. We are very persevering in our work. We are radical and uncompromising, because death, the death that surrounds us and constantly hangs over our heads, took our children from us, the beautiful children that we gave birth to with such happiness...

(Applause)

... and whom we shall never see again, but whom we see in the young people who continue the struggle. We see and we feel the presence of our children in those young people, and for that reason we want to protect them. We do not want anyone else to go missing in Latin America. We do not want young people in the shanty towns to die — young people who, besides having no work, are persecuted and murdered. And we call on all of you, all the Members of this Parliament which has awarded this prize to us, to ensure that when agreements are made with our country, they are not agreements to supply arms. We do not want guns, we want books...

(Applause)

... so that we can teach our young people; we do not want tanks, we want hospitals, so that everyone can have equal access to health care; and we do not want military aircraft, we want schools, lots of schools, so that we can build a better world. We do not want wars. We are struggling with all our might against repression, oppression, poverty and hunger. The system in Latin America is utterly shameful. It is a repressive system which, seen from Europe, may appear to be democratic. But democracy will not exist in my country as long as children die of starvation; it will not exist as long as there are children who do not have the chance to go to school; it will not exist as long as a child dies of starvation every 20