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Shirin Ebadi's Talk

Mr President, Madam mayor, Honourable ministers, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen!

I am very happy that I have been able to visit the beautiful city of Lille and to speak to this distinguished audience. I would like to thank all those who have been involved in organising this World Forum, especially Mr. Philippe Vasseur and Mrs. Fahimeh Robiolle, as well as the interpreters who interpret my remarks.

Ladies and gentlemen!

Unfortunately we live at a time when the speed of progress in the fields of science and technology has not been matched with our advances in moral and spiritual fields. This has resulted in magnifying the dimensions of human rights violations. If in the 18th century the victims of wars were limited mainly to the armed forces, in the 21st century the leaders who declare wars, high-level officials who execute those orders and the commanders who lead the wars are immune from harm, but a vast number of innocent civilians get killed.

Just let us look at the events that have taken place after America's military invasion of Iraq. None of those who issued orders for that war suffered the least financial or bodily loss and harm. However, so far, more than 500,000 civilians have been killed in Iraq. If science and technology do not go hand in hand with moral values they will be dangerous. Let us remember that the invention of dynamite was initially intended at helping the miners and reducing their toil and hardship. Nevertheless, those who were not bound by any moral values turned dynamite into one of the most dangerous tools for the murder of human beings.

There is absolutely no doubt about the enormous value of certain sciences, such as biochemistry, physics, nuclear technology, etc. However, today we see how state or non-state terrorists misuse such sciences and cause mayhem in the world. Although there is nothing wrong with making profit as the result of engaging in commerce and industry, nevertheless, if this is not done within a proper framework, and if the profit motive of industrialists and shareholders is not checked and properly regulated it will have many negative consequences.

Globalisation will be a positive social development if it can reduce the existing inequalities and can pave the way for lasting world peace. How do we expect to live in a world without tension when only one per cent of the world's population owns 80 per cent of global wealth? According to UNDP figures, a quarter of the people in the world live on less than two dollars a day. Still millions of people do not have access to clean drinking water, and millions suffer from starvation. The amount of food that is thrown out of European and US restaurants could eradicate hunger in Africa.

I hope that this Forum will be able to find appropriate solutions to these problems and will propose remedies for removing these glaring inequalities in the world.

Ladies and gentlemen!

I come from the Middle East, which has been gripped by chaos and violence for a long time. For many years, many innocent people there have been consumed in the flames of war, which are getting more intense with every passing day. Some people speak of changing the map of the Middle East. This is the sign of some evil plots that they have hatched for this part of the world.

Two non-binding resolutions have been passed by the US Congress, one of which says that the Iraqi oil should be privatised, and the other one calls for the partition of Iraq into three autonomous regions, the Shi'i, the Sunni and the Kurdish regions.

Regardless of whether such ideas are correct or not, innocent Iraqi people ask themselves why their fate must be decided thousands of miles away from Iraq in the US Congress by those who are not Iraqis! Of course, those resolutions are seemingly non-binding. However, in the world of politics we know what the meaning of such resolutions is and where they will lead.

During the past five minutes that I have been standing here and speaking to you at least four persons have lost their lives due to wars or terrorism or have been executed. These are very sad statistics. It is tragic that during five minutes so many people have fallen victim to wars and other related calamities, and their relatives who are sheltering in some bombed out buildings, and dwellings that have been destroyed by war or terrorism ask themselves why they have such a tragic fate.

As a Muslim who has lived all her life in Iran and is to some extent aware of the situation in Islamic countries, I must say that two main factors have given rise to this situation.

The first factor is the lack of democracy, or defective democracy.

Unfortunately, most Islamic countries in that part of the world, due to a number of historical reasons, are deprived of advanced forms of democracy. This creates a big gap between the governments and the people. I compare this situation to a house whose owner has left the house and has left the door open. It is clear that burglars would be able to steal anything valuable that exists in that house. In that case, the owner of the house is as guilty of negligence as is the burglar of stealing. The same is true of a country where people are separated from their governments.

People who are hungry, who are deprived of individual freedoms, who are deprived of the freedom of expression and beliefs, who cannot get a job in keeping with the level of their education and expertise without having some connection with those in authority, people whose children are rotting in prisons; in one word, in a society that is in the grip of despotism – whether religious or political despotism – in such societies people cannot and do not wish to support their governments.

Furthermore, they manifest their opposition to their undemocratic governments in different ways. They turn to foreign powers and ask for financial assistance in order to fight against their own governments. They choose terrorism as a means of achieving their goals, and encourage young people to commit suicide in the hope of going to heaven in the next life. In order to achieve their political goals, they resort to hostage taking and the killing of innocent people, and thousands of other calamitous acts.

If these people lived in a country that had a healthy and democratic government, if due to political criticism they would not face the gallows or prison cells, if they could achieve their goals by engaging in healthy political activities, instead of resorting to guerrilla tactics and armed struggles, if they could freely express their demands, if their national resources were not spent on the purchase of weapons, the situation in today's world would be much better than it is.

What is the justification of the governments in that region for their violation of democratic principles? They argue that democracy is not compatible with Islam. As their nations are Muslims, the governments in those countries regard themselves as the representatives and guardians of Islam. They argue that they should only rule according to Islamic laws, not according to democratic principles. Of course, such governments' understanding of Islam is only limited to how they interpret it, and they totally reject and dismiss the interpretations of other Muslim scholars and intellectuals. Such governments regard any criticism of their behaviour as

being tantamount to a criticism of Islam, and they accuse their opponents of blasphemy and of being deserving of death.

They argue that as democracy and human rights have emerged out of the West, consequently, such concepts are not compatible with Eastern, especially Islamic, cultures. They regard the nationalists who advocate democracy as being Western stooges and committing treason against their own culture, and the penalty for such treachery is imprisonment. Some governments, in order to justify their views, make use of certain terms such as 'Islamic democracy', or 'Islamic human rights'. When they are criticised for the way that they rule they take shelter behind the slogan of Islamic democracy, whilst democracy means the same thing in the West as in the East. There is no such thing as Islamic or Christian democracy.

Fortunately, the emergence of a united front of Muslim intellectuals, without any political affiliations, provides the best hope for the liberation of Muslims. This unified front does not have a name, has no leader, and has no central office or branches. It resides in the heart of every Muslim who is not prepared to tolerate tyranny and who is not prepared to accept any false claims in the name of religion. Religious intellectuals, whose number is fortunately growing in Islamic countries, are posing a challenge to Islamic governments. With arguments that are derived from the heart of religion they prove that every government that claims to be Islamic in name is not necessarily Islamic in reality. They wish to prevent Islam from being misused. They shout that Islam is compatible with democracy. They say that we can be Muslims while respecting democracy. We can be Muslims while respecting human rights. Islam is the religion of equality. Islam is opposed to dictatorship. Muslims must not be deceived by the claims of bullying despots. The ever-growing front of Muslim intellectuals is the harbinger of democracy in the Middle East.

This issue, namely the harmony between Islam and democracy, especially at a time when some governments in Islamic countries have come to power through elections, is of great importance. In its classic meaning, democracy means the rule of the majority. However, a majority that comes to power in a free election is not entitled to rule in any way that it wishes. Let us not forget that many despots in the world initially came to power through democratic means, for instance Adolph Hitler. Therefore, a mere victory in elections does not mean democracy. A majority that comes to power as the result of free elections must act within the framework of democracy. What is the framework of democracy? The framework of democracy is respect for human rights. In other words, the majority faction that has come to power can only rule within the framework of human rights, and is not entitled to violate those principles.

No majority that has come to power is entitled to oppress half of society – namely women – in the name of religion, such as the way that Iranian women are being oppressed at the moment in the name of Islam. No majority that has come to power is entitled to deprive people of the freedom of belief and expression in the name of its ideology, as is being done in my country, Iran, where it is a crime even to criticise the constitution. Censorship does not only apply to books and the media. In my country they have filtered many Internet sites, even Google.

On the basis of the definition that I have provided for democracy, governments do not derive their legitimacy only from the ballot box and people's votes. They derive their legitimacy from people's votes, as well as respect for human rights. Any excuse for the violation of human rights, such as cultural relativism, or religion or ideology is unacceptable.

The second reason for wars and bloodshed in the Middle East

Fortunately or unfortunately, many Islamic countries in the Middle East possess vast oil deposits. The lifeblood of the technological world is under the control of this part of the world. Just imagine what a calamity would come about in the Western world, especially in America, if the flow of oil were stopped from Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for just three months!

Consequently, as the result of its rich resources, the Middle East is a magnet for greed and domination. The region suffers from both overt and covert imperialism and colonialism. Neo-colonialists cannot tolerate nationalist governments that wish to defend their nations' interests. They are more in favour of their lackeys than of independent nationalist governments. A good example of this was the American-led coup in 1953 in Iran that toppled Dr Mosaddeq's nationalist government. As the result of this coup, the Iranian people felt deep hostility towards America for many years.

Of course, the passage of time changes many things, including the methods used by colonialists. Today, colonialists do not act as they did 50 years ago, and do not put forward the same arguments that they did 50 years ago, but their aims and goals are the same, namely the plundering of the national resources of other nations. Consequently, the establishment of true democracy – not only in name, but in reality – in all Islamic countries of the region would be the best guarantee of lasting peace and stability in the Middle East. A democratic government which comes to power in a country would end the domination of colonialist plunderers, because popular resistance is the best defence against any superpower.

Ladies and gentlemen!

With your permission, I would like to say a few words about my country Iran. The Iranian people have been fighting for the establishment of democracy and human rights for many years. In Iran there is sexual and religious discrimination. Freedom of expression has been suppressed, and the closure of many newspapers and the detention of a large number of journalists are best proofs of the lack of freedom in Iran. Recently, two Kurdish journalists were even sentenced to death. According to the Press Law, any criticism of the constitution by a newspaper results in the suspension of that newspaper. In Iran democracy is not complete, because people are not free to vote for anyone they like. Rather, the qualifications of the candidates must be first approved by the Guardian Council.

Iran is a rich country. However, as the result of the large military budget, inappropriate and illogical assistance provided by the Iranian government to some Islamic groups such as Hizbullah and HAMAS, as well as financial misappropriation by those in power, the Iranian people are getting poorer each day. At the moment, one-sixth of the Iranian population is living below the poverty line. These are some of the political criticisms that the Iranian people have of their government. However, all of us know that improving human rights and democracy is the duty of the Iranian people and has nothing to do with American or Israeli soldiers.

We are against the bombing or launching of military attacks on Iran, because we have seen the result of such actions in Iraq. A military attack or even threats of launching a military attack would enable the government to suppress those who are fighting for freedom, on the excuse of safeguarding national security, and furthermore to suppress all opposition voices, accusing them of collaborating with America and receiving American dollars.

Finally, I wish to call on you freedom-loving French people to encourage Mr Nicolas Sarkozy to think of France's national interests. Certainly, it is not in any country's interest to wage war. You should not get involved in a futile war and you should not allow your children to be sacrificed in the name of democracy.

Long live the friendship between the French and Iranian nations!