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Ambassador of Conscience Award: The words of Nelson Mandela

In Johannesburg, this week, in the warm company of friends, like Nadine Gordimer, I became an Amnesty International Ambassador of Conscience.

It was a joy for me to receive this honour from the members of the world's largest human rights movement. It was heartening, too, that the award is inspired by the great Irish writer Seamus Heaney's poem, From the Republic of Conscience, which reminds us all of our duty:

Their embassies, he said, were everywhere but operated independently and no ambassador would ever be relieved.

Like Amnesty International, I have been struggling for justice and human rights for long years. I have retired from public life now. But as long as injustice and inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest. We must become stronger still.

Through the work of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, and The Mandela Rhodes Foundation, I am continuing my struggle for human rights. These three charitable institutions operating in my name are tasked with continuing my work in important areas I have been concerned with throughout my life: children and youth, memory and dialogue, and building new generations of ethical leaders.

It is my wish that this award can help all activists around the world to shine their candle of hope for the forgotten prisoners of poverty. Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is people who have made poverty and tolerated poverty, and it is people who will overcome it.

Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of fundamental human rights. Everyone everywhere has the right to live with dignity; free from fear and oppression, free from hunger and thirst, and free to express themselves and associate at will.

Yet in this new century, millions of people remain imprisoned, enslaved, and in chains.

Massive poverty and inequality are such terrible scourges of our times - times in which the world also boasts breathtaking advances in science, technology, industry and wealth accumulation.

While poverty persists, there is no true freedom. Amnesty International is right to stand up against the rights violations that drive and deepen poverty.

People living in poverty have the least access to power to shape policies - to shape their future. But they have the right to a voice. They must not be made to sit in silence as 'development' happens around them, at their expense.

True development is impossible without the participation of those concerned.

Take the right to housing. Three million people in Africa have been evicted since the turn of the century from informal settlements.

We have also seen in Africa the scourge of HIV/AIDS, decimating the lives of our people, especially those living in poverty. All of us -- rich and poor, governments, companies and individuals -- share the responsibility to ensure everyone has access to information, means of prevention, and treatment. And our starting point must be respect for individuals' rights.

We know that it is the already marginalised who are most affected by HIV/AIDS. And we know that within this group, women are marginalised yet more and bear the most significant burden. As daughters, mothers, sisters and grandmothers, every day they experience and live out the reality of this pandemic.

Women are also being killed by other preventable causes. One woman dies every minute from deaths relating to pregnancy. And where do almost all these women live? In the developing world -- in poverty.

Amnesty International is working to make rights real for women. Through its work on poverty, and through its campaigning against the violence they face.

Women and girls need safe environments to learn and to work. At the moment, discrimination and violence exacerbate their lack of access to the very tools they need to make their own rights a reality.

If girls do not have a safe and non-discriminatory environment to pursue education or gain employment, the consequences reverberate throughout their lives. Denying them the choice and freedoms we take for granted.

Women and girls living in abusive relationships, for example, are unable to flee the violence because they are financially dependent on their abusers.

This balance of power, and the broader one it represents, must be shifted.

I have spoken before about the need for a 'turning point'. I see this Ambassador of Conscience Award as one more step towards that turning point. In her generous speech, Nadine Gordimer reflected on a conversation she and I had in 1998. She reminded us of what I said then:

"What I want to see is an environment where the young people of our country have a real chance to develop the inherent possibilities they have to create a better life for themselves... That is what development is about."

If all human rights activists around the world believe this, and act on this, and get others to believe, we will have our turning point.

NB: Please ensure that this wording appears at the bottom of the text: "This is an adaptation of remarks made by Mr Nelson Mandela on the occasion of him becoming an Amnesty International Ambassador of Conscience."

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