



North-South Prize

Speech by Louise Arbour, President & CEO of the International Crisis Group, on the occasion of the XVI Award Ceremony of the North-South Prize of the Council of Europe

Excellencies,

I am very honoured to be with you today to receive this prestigious prize from the North/South Center of the Council of Europe, and I am particularly happy to share this occasion with President Lula, a great world leader, and an exemplary Latin American democrat.

As its name indicates, this prize has something to do with geography. But geography, particularly north/south geography, can be deceiving. I am of course a person of the North, and I perceive myself as such. I come from Canada, a member of the Circumpolar Conference, a country about which Gilles Vigneault, one of our leading poets and songwriters, has written the famous verse: “Mon pays ce n’est pas un pays c’est l’hiver” (my country is not a country it’s winter).

Yet within Canada, I’m from the South. The North, in Canada, is the international South. It is where many aboriginal communities still aspire to the fulfilment of their social, economic and cultural rights on par with their fellow citizens. So I hope they will not take offence that I stand here today, receiving this prize as person of the North. In part I say to them that they are well represented by the Southerner President Lula, and more importantly I know that they are generous enough to share their northerness with me on this occasion.

Geography has of course another connotation.

During the Cold War, the world was defined in East/West terms, and political competition was heavily centered on security interests. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the geographic metaphor shifted to the North/South dividing line, emphasizing development, more than security concerns. We then witnessed the emergence of South/South cooperation, as evidence of the increasing significance of a multipolar world. And despite challenges to its universality, I suggest to you that one of the great unifying forces of our pluralistic world has been the international human rights framework.

And the human rights agenda has had a long, invariably positive history in the Council of Europe.

I have long been an admirer of one of its leading institutions, the European Court of Human Rights. It is very fitting that the court received the 2010 International Four Freedoms Award from the Roosevelt Foundation in light of its splendid contribution to the development and the enforcement of human rights norms among the large membership of the Council. I point to the court because of my own background. While much of my international work has focused on international criminal justice and human rights, it is in the courts of Canada that I began, leaned, and refined my understanding of the fundamental principles of life in a democracy. It is in the courts that minorities are most likely to find protection, and that the exercise of power, even legitimately and democratically acquired political power, can be put in check against the constraints of the constitution. This is one of the most important features of the Rule of Law.

So I stand here today in this beautiful parliamentary setting, taking this opportunity to pay tribute to the judiciary, where and when it behaves as a true upholder of human rights.

I have now moved on, in my own work, into the broader international field of prevention of deadly conflict. Recent and on-going events in North Africa speak loudly about the democratic aspirations of people everywhere, and of the profound failure of the international order to assist them in the pursuit of those legitimate aspirations, at least when it could have been achieved without the spilling of blood. I mentioned North Africa, but I could just as easily have pointed to Côte d'Ivoire or Afghanistan, or any number of countries where the proper balance of development, security and human rights is still a distant dream.

It is once again a call on our conscience, as though we had not inherited enough moral failures. But it is also a loud and clear recognition of the universality of rights and an unambiguous rejection of the claims of cultural specificity upon which overturned leaders had sought to establish their authority. It is above all an ethical movement, one that calls for justice, rather than corruption, for decency, rather than greed, and for the simple right of all to participate in their own governance.

I hear it also as a call to the North/South solidarity that we celebrate today. It is fitting that we should do so in Portugal, at a time when social and economic stresses find an outlet in robust democratic institutions.

If I may conclude on a personal note. Particularly in the presence of President Lula, I want to pay tribute to another great Brazilian, Sergio Vieira de Mello, an extraordinary international civil servant who stood for everything this Prize stands for, and who was my immediate predecessor as the

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. He was killed in Bagdad, along with 21 colleagues, and his life and death must continue to remind us of the honour – and at times the cost – of service for the greater good, in the spirit of North-South solidarity.

I am once again very grateful, and very honoured, to be with you today.