

Nuremberg International Human Rights Award 1999

Words of Thank by the Prizewinner
Fatimata M'Baye

Mr. President,
Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury,
Lord Mayor of the City of Nuremberg,
Ladies and Gentlemen who were honoured with the Nuremberg International Human Rights Award,
Dear guests,
Dear founders of this award,

It is a great honour for me to have been chosen by this eminent jury for the Nuremberg International Human Rights Award.

In all humility, I accept this torch which my predecessors have carried with the dignity and modesty which is characteristic for all fervent defenders of human rights - some of them are here with us today.

It is always difficult to talk about oneself, because, as a proverb of the Haal Pulaar (my ethnic group) says: "Those who blow their own trumpet, tend to heap gold and silver on their heads."

Nevertheless I may say that I have been a militant fighter for human rights since the days of my childhood - without knowing it. This fighting spirit was instilled into me by my mother. She was a pious and brave woman who - in spite of belonging to a large family of Marabout-Moslems - brought up her children, girls and boys alike, in a spirit of love and respect for each other.

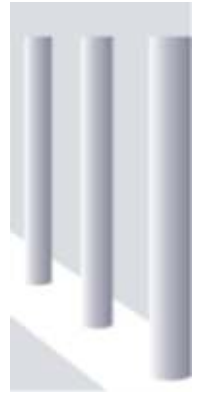
It was her who always encouraged me to continue my studies and to take up a profession which was almost exclusively male in Mauritania. And it was her, a fervent fighter for the rights of women and children who shaped me for the path in life I was to take up. Very often she used to tell us: "If you're incapable as a woman, you would also have been incapable as a man."

Even in the most difficult and taxing situations, she managed to keep her pride, her courage as well as her good humour, and she has always given me unflinching support.

When I grew up, when I became a teenager, I found myself rebelling more and more against the social injustice and against the violations of human rights in my country which manifested themselves in a lack of equality in our society. Every day I saw men, women and children in my country and all over the world becoming victims of all kinds of oppression, contempt and humiliation and living in conditions of abject poverty.

During my school and university days I therefore got involved in human rights associations and movements - fighting these wrongs together with my fellow pupils and students, with school and university teachers and fellow citizens from all ethnic groups in Mauritania. My university education in the field of politics and law also prepared me for my specialist career in private law. This allowed me to help in a modest way those who are harassed, and who don't have the means for paying a lawyer or legal adviser.

Please allow me to pay my respect here to the late Maître Diagana Mamadou Samba, founder member and first president of the "Association Mauritanienne des Droits de l'Homme", the Mauritanian Human Rights Organisation. He passed away in 1983 - may his soul rest in peace. To him I owe my education as a lawyer, but he also guided me in



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my fight for the truth and my search of the truth. I would also like to honour here Maître Diabira Maroufa, lawyer and founder member of the AMDH who gave me unfailing and untiring support, especially in the most difficult moments. He initiated the lawyers' collective for the defence of victims' families.

I was very lucky in meeting in the course of my studies Professor Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara. He contributed to my education in the social sciences. As chance would have it, we are today members of the same association whose founder member and vice-president I am and whose president he is.

I would also like to pay homage to the Mauritanian Chamber of Lawyers which has made the protection of human rights its main task. Here the cultures of brotherhood and professional ethics are brought alive in an exemplary fashion, and my fellow lawyers have demonstrated their determination and their commitment to the fight against any form of human rights violation. The spontaneous formation of lawyers' groups whenever human dignity is in danger or whenever freedom is held in chains, has in the meantime become a special form of jurisprudence, unique in the history of the Mauritanian Chamber of Lawyers in its respect and struggle for human rights.

The formation of public opinion and the political processes in Mauritania between 1986 and 1998 have demonstrated to international observers for more than ten years that there are women and men in Mauritania who are united by their love of freedom and justice and who refuse to accept the image of a divided Mauritania, of a Mauritania where human rights are regularly treated with contempt.

After the happenings in the region between 1989 and 1993, not forgetting the earlier happenings of 1966 which brought the country to the brink of civil war, as well as in view of the arbitrary arrests of young Mauritanian men from then until 1998, I felt the strong urge to do something so that this kind of injustice would never be repeated again.

Thus we, the younger professionals, as well as the older activists in civilian society, got organised in associations in order to block the way to all forms of massive and systematic violations of human rights. This manifested in the practice of slavery and its contemporary forms; in the discrimination of the black African population of Mauritania, which I am part of; in the exclusion of a part of Mauritanian society on the grounds of ethnic, tribal, regional or social affiliation; in the stifling of liberties and rights of individuals: of the freedom of opinion and expression of opinion, the freedom of assembly, the freedom of association, the freedom of the press, the freedom of moving anywhere in the country without being harassed, as well as the freedom of participating in the development of the country and many others; in summary executions without proper trial, in arbitrary arrests, in degrading and humiliating practices.

All those violations of human rights which are presently being perpetrated in Mauritania are doubtless a source for tension and violence, not just in Mauritania, but on the entire African continent and elsewhere - demonstrated by the armed conflicts in Congo, in Rwanda, in Angola, Algeria, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and others as well as in Asia, Europe (Turkey, Kosovo) and Latin America.

The Mauritanian Human Rights movement was strengthened by the hard struggle put up by all the group of widows whose husbands were murdered in army barracks, by the group of surviving members of the military who were only saved because human rights activist stood up for them publicly, by the group of all arbitrarily dismissed civil servants, by S.O.S. Esclaves and so forth.

Today, Ladies and Gentlemen, some people pose the question why the Human Rights Award is presented in Nuremberg and why it is presented at all. For me, the City of Nuremberg is a symbol of great hope in the world, in the wake of the indescribable humiliations and



inhumanities of the Second World War. I only know the city from my history books at high school where the focus was on the horrors of the two World Wars which were so devastating for humankind in this century.

Although nearly all UN member states have signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and the principles of this declaration were even incorporated into nearly all African constitutional texts - also in the Maghreb region - as well as into various African regional charters, governments continue to disregard them. All this leads to an enormous work load for human rights activists in the field.

Human rights activists have also become the prime target of state powers.

Presently those who defend human rights are persecuted, threatened, imprisoned and hunted in all those countries where there is little hope that the government will respect decisions taken in the UN or in other regional and subregional organisations. I would like to remind you of the situation of my colleague Khenais Kisylla, president of the Tunisian human rights league who in 1998 was sentenced to 3 years in prison because he had dared to say no to arbitrary decisions, as well as the arrest of Hafez Aboud Saed, Secretary General of the Egyptian human rights organisation in December 1998, on the eve of the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Maître Aref Ali Aref who was persecuted by the government of Djibouti also has to answer to Egyptian courts. Think of all the human rights fighters who are hunted, persecuted and imprisoned in Turkey, in Iran and in Congo, not to forget those defenders of human rights who today have to live in exile and all the others who have fallen on the field of honour as martyrs for the defence and the protection of human rights, in a word for social justice and peace.

Present measures taken against war criminals and against those who in the name of their administrative, political or social responsibilities committed crimes against humanity, the establishment of an International Tribunal for Rwanda and for former Yugoslavia etc. as well as the persecution of the former Chilean president August Pinochet initiated by the world on the basis of the international applicability of legal norms and of the international convention against torture, as well as the proceedings instigated against Slobodan Milosevich, against Mauritanian torturers and others are proof of the fact that people have understood the experience of Nuremberg.

Why is there an International Nuremberg Human Rights Award at all? I think that the city of Nuremberg could not have made a better investment, because no human being with a conscience may forget the horrors which previous generations had to experience and which to this day our generation has to experience in various parts of the globe.

This award is to remind us of all those who had to go without knowing why, of all those who are still suppressed by their fellow human beings without knowing why. But this award is also a symbol for humanity as a whole, challenging people to respect human rights and human dignity. This is why the defenders of human rights I have the privilege of representing in this ceremony today demand that those must not be forgotten who have been executed arbitrarily, unjustly and without fair trial, who have been arrested or banned from their country, who have not had the chance to enjoy their full economic, social and cultural rights. I am particularly thinking of women and children who are always the most vulnerable groups in all armed conflicts, in all dictatorships and in all situations of tension. Until this day, long trails of fugitives, of women, children and old people line the streets of Kosovo, of East Timor, of Rwanda and of Congo. Others fall victim to slave traders and terror.

I would not like to close without congratulating the international community on their efforts in the fight against the perpetrators of war crimes getting unpunished, and without encouraging the international community in those efforts. I would particularly like to pay my respect to the International Federation of Human Rights, of the World Organisation against Torture, of the French League of Human Rights for the work they did for the cause of human rights, work which is a testimony to the respect and the promotion of human rights.



In view of today's globalisation, independence of justice is a demand which does not permit any concessions. Transparency is one of the indispensable conditions for the realisation of democracy and the rule of law, which are the only guarantees for social integration is guaranteed, that social exclusion and discrimination in the societies of Mauritania, of Sudan and other regions such as Kosovo, Turkey etc is abolished.

Being aware of the prime importance of these principles, my organisation and myself would like to take this forum to pledge again our commitment to the protection of human rights and to the fight against all forms of human rights violations. We also undertake to work for the promotion of human rights and for the establishment of social justice in Mauritania.

Finally, this Nuremberg Award I had the honour of receiving will help us in overcoming obstacles and not to remain silent - and thus sometimes become accomplices - when human rights are violated in Mauritania and elsewhere.

Thank you very much indeed.

Maître Fatimata M'Baye
Vice-President of the Mauritanian Human Rights Association
September 13, 1999

stability and lasting peace in the world.

This is why I would like to appeal urgently to all political decision-makers, to the international community, to the UN, to the European Union etc. that they demand that countries who are waging war lay down their arms, that justice is obeyed, where all those who have been part of a crime against humanity will be held responsible, that reparations are paid to the victims or their families, that slavery is abolished and the victims of slavery are paid indemnities and their social and economic