*To be checked against delivery*

*The International Conference to celebrate the Nobel Laureate Bertha von Suttner at the 130th anniversary of her book “Lay Down Your Arms” Prague, Czech Republic, October 7-8 2019. Organised by the PragueVision for Sustainable Security*

Gunnar Stålsett:

**Keynote address: Supporting Civil society Action through international peace Prizes.**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to address this critical topic. I have chosen to focus on *one* peace prize, although I have served on the committee of two such awards for many years. I have also adopted a European emphasis, but the horizon is global.

Distinguished participants,

Today we celebrate a vision that never dies. We feel the sorrow of war and the longing for peace. We sense the heartbeat of heroes and the will of everyday women and men who brought light in times of darkness.

The Countess Bertha von Suttner is a lady with a lamp of peace, shining on our path towards truth, justice and reconciliation. She challenges us to seek what serves for peace today.

Here, in Prague, we praise the profound humanism and religious roots of the new Czech Republic. We honour centuries of this nation’s secular and spiritual contribution to European culture. This beautiful city and its people have lived through a history of oppression and may now rejoice in freedom.

Born in this city, Countess Bertha von Suttner, was the first woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

By her anti-war novel “Lay down your arms”, she reached a vast audience in Europe and the USA. Her non-violence strategies and her vision for a world without arms inspired the peace movement of her time and have a message even today

Her acceptance speech in Oslo in 1905 was titled: “The Evolution of the Peace Movement.”

If evolution has a leader, she was one. If development needs inspiration, she gave it. When we today seek direction, she is a mentor. Her message rings equally relevant today as hundred years ago. She calls us, individuals and civil society, academics and politicians to courageous actions for peace-making. She personified freedom.

She had inspired Alfred Nobel to include peace in his last will. It seems that it was her understanding that is reflected in his testament in these words: “fraternity between nations, abolition of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses.”

The Nobel Peace Prize Committee, consisting of five members appointed by the Norwegian Parliament, as stipulated in Alfred Nobel’s Testament, are stewards of the Will of Alfred Nobel.

They are tasked with the problematic contextualising of a somewhat open concept. Among hundreds of candidates, they must find the recipient who stands out among the many individuals, institutions and movements.

Along with the evolution of the peace movement, there has been an evolution of the understanding of peace, and hence the development of the Prize. What was the intention of Alfred Nobel? How is peace understood today?

No wonder this most coveted prize is also the most controversial. Again, this week, we may expect praise and protest as the 2019 laureate is announced to the world.

It was my privilege to serve on the committee for 17 years, off and on, since 1985. I know the arduous process and the excitement of a consensus after months of deliberation.

 A short encounter with the Nobel Peace Prize committee may inform our topic.

Since 1901 there are 133 Nobel laureates, 106 individuals and 27 organisations. The prizes span a wide range of activities for peace. There are the obvious candidates of disarmament, arms control and peace negotiations. Humanitarian work and human rights have been included from the beginning. Democracy and development signify the evolution towards a concept of positive peace.

Most prizes involve an element of civil society. Be it the Red Cross, which has received the honour three times, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees two times, the anti-apartheid struggle, the nuclear issue or the climate crisis; civil society is at the heart of the action. Apartheid was ousted only by the mobilisation of civil society, the UN-led eliminations of weapons of mass destruction including the nuclear weapons could only be reached by grass-roots engagement. The critical efforts today to save mother earth likewise.

I see the Sustainable Development Goals as an agenda for peace. They were identified in a consultative process with civil society. Five million people from across the world shared their vision for the world in 2030.

The 17 goals, such as a good education, better health care, access to clean water and sanitation, protecting rivers and forests and oceans, political freedoms, equality between men and women, these are all dimension of peace as the quality of life. They can only be reached in cooperation between, individuals, civil society and state. I will return to this perspective.

 Now, let Bertha von Suttner’s own words give us a glimpse of her talent. She opened her Nobel lecture in Oslo with these words:

*“The stars of eternal truth and right have always shone in the firmament of human understanding. The process of bringing them down to earth, remoulding them into practical forms, imbuing them with vitality, and then make use of them, has been a long one.”*

Indeed, the processes for peace in Europe had already been century long. But worse to come. Two world wars were yet to brutalise Europe. Evil was to dehumanise politicians on a scale never seen before. Instead of the downing of arms, development of weapons, weapons of mass destruction. Instead of a Europe of harmony and solidarity; holocaust, deportations, mass migration, death by famine and disease. Europe once priding itself as a civilised, humane and Christian continent, entered an age of war crimes and crime against humanity.

To use the term of Berta von Suttner: “The firmament of human understanding” was blackened by the clouds of bombs, stained by innocent blood, and buried with mass graves.

And yet there was that still prophetic voice of peace. There was that unquenchable hope of freedom. Bertha von Suttner’s values of “eternal truth and right” survived. A new world order emerged with the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as its foundation.

Again, from her acceptance speech*:*

 *“One of the eternal truths is that happiness is created and developed in peace, and one of the eternal rights is the individual’s right to live. The strongest of all instincts that of self-preservation is an assertion of this right, affirmed and sanctified by the ancient commandment: Thou shalt not kill”*

Today, in a new century, there are setbacks in our Europe. There is a denial of the legitimacy of everyone’s quest for happiness. There is a rejection of every individual’s right to life. This attitude is threatening European identity, destroying its unity and undermining fundamental values. Thus, Bertha von Suttner’s words are a wake-up call to Europe today. To be precise, she tells us that self-preservation for migrants and refugees is both a shared human instinct and a divine command.

Progress has been made. We rejoice that the individual’s right to life is enshrined in international law. The right to peace is repeatedly affirmed and further developed and applied by solemn declarations of the United Nations. Rights to peace are asserted, but not yet as *human rights*.

In this city of Prague, the birthplace of Berta von Suttner, the nexus of war and peace marked the century after her death. It was here that Vaclav Havel continued her mission in the manifest Charta 77 and the European Council of Tolerance and Reconciliation.

Bertha von Suttner and Vaclav Havel shared a commitment to Europe as a beacon of civilisation.

 But to in the annals of the Nobel Peace Prize, she is followed by such prophetic peace messengers as Carl Fredrich von Ossietzky. In the 1930-is fought Nazism and fascism. He was sentenced to prison for treason and espionage.

 In this century there is Liu Xiaobo who in 2011 was honoured for the long and nonviolent struggle for fundamental human rights. He was sentenced to eleven years in prison for” inciting subversion of state power.”

Among other luminaries in her category, on the list of peace heroes, are Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Dalai Lama, Rigoberto Menchu, Lech Walesa, Elie Wiesel and Nelson Mandela.

They were personal stars. But their interaction with civil society was essential for their mission.

So, let us for a moment focus on civil society.

In modern discourse, the term is used interchangeably with non-governmental. That describes what it is not. We need to appreciate what it is.

Civil society is a term of antiquity from Athens, Jerusalem and Rome. It is often referred to as the third sector of society, that is between the individual and the state.

In a few days, we shall honour the role of civil society when we commemorate the fall of the Berlin Wall which both physically and ideologically divided Europe during the cold war. Individual leaders and popular movements such as the labour unions and religious institutions constituted an alternative society to the oppressive communist state.

Professor Jurgen Habermas, who this year turned 90, has restored civil society as an integral dimension of democracy and as a civilisation concept. He uses the term “public sphere” to encourage “rational will-formation”. He maintains that the public sphere is a domain of rational and democratic interaction, community exchange and social behaviour. The “public sphere” is integral to the political realm**. Remarkably, he now acknowledges the essential and unique role that religious actors and voices may contribute in the public sphere.**

Civil society as a concept implies a commitment to fundamental human values. Civil society speaks truth to power, appealing to conscience and common sense. It stands in contrast to a populism marked by nationalism race, ethnicity and religious fundamentalism.

**Some governments tend to ignore civil society, or they look upon them with suspicion. Others turn to civil society actors only when they are supporting the political line of the government. The dependence of many civil society organisations of financial support from the government makes them vulnerable to such pressure. More dramatic is the language used by President Trump in the UN General Assembly opening session last month when he described civil society support to refuges as “evil.” The same is reflected in the Brazilian president Bolsonoro's claim that the wildfires in Amazonas are the strategy of civil society. In Norway representatives of a political party in Government accuses the humanitarian organisation “Doctors without borders”, to support human trafficking because they save refugees from drowning in the Mediterranean ocean.**

We are today again in a critical phase in human history, which should energise civil society actors for initiatives that transcend party politics.

Increasing billions of dollars that could and should have been invested in human development and climate protection, are wasted in an arms race under the pretext of “national security”.

If national security were to be based on ethical principles and common sense, they would be limited to that which is necessary for the safety of all, not serving the dominance of the few. Indeed, there is no security which is not shared security.

No other issue has found such frequent support by the Nobel Peace Prize Committee as has the nuclear threat.

My first prize in 1985 was to International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear war.

While the United Nations have taken a promising step towards the total outlawing and elimination of nuclear weapons, too many member states remain hostage to their own security arrangements. The UN Security Council by its dominance of atomic powers and veto mechanism acts as an obstacle to human security

Two years ago, the Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for the work to “draw attention to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons” and its “ground-breaking efforts to achieve a treaty-based prohibition of such weapons.”

This is a civil society prize with impact on governments and international law. The many millions of campaigners and the multitude of organizations constituting ICAN – is the best expression of the confluence of civil society, science, diplomacy and politics to establish a new global norm and in the end to rid the world of one the most obvious threat of mass destruction - alongside the climate crisis.

At the World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Germany in August this year with more than 900 leaders of all world religions gave unanimous support the Treaty on the Prohibition of nuclear weapons and to ICAN s mission. Members and communities worldwide were mobilised to bring their government on board. This action will be followed up in close cooperation with Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non- Proliferation and Disarmament (PNND)

In the same category of threat to humanity is the climate issue. The climate issue has a stronger appeal today civil society action, especially among the younger generation than the nuclear issue. The campaign against climate change is like the anti-nuclear weapons campaign, scientifically based, politically grounded and universally recognised as a struggle to save our ecosystem and the entire biosphere.

Religions for Peace as a member of ICAN joined other civil society actors with its adoption of the declaration “Faith for Forest” and its endorsement of the global program Interfaith Rainforest Initiative. The latter is a stellar example of action for peace jointly by governments, the United Nations, scientists and religious communities together with indigenous peoples

In conclusion;

The common thread in the efforts for peace by individuals and institutions honoured by an international peace prize is a commitment to shared human values, protection of human dignity and preservation of the earth.

The battle for a democratic, tolerant and value-based Europe, is the battle for peace, for truth, freedom and tolerance. Without respect of these values, if we are forgetting or even rejecting the ethical heritage of our Christian, Jewish, Muslim roots, we are left in a spiritual void and moral chaos.

What is our identity if not the ethical values that have formed our civilisation, which made it possible to counter the demons of Nazism, fascism and Stalinism?

Who are we if we forget the ethical imperative quoted by Berta von Suttner, “Thou shalt not kill”?

What are our strength if not our personal dignity and our spiritual heritage?

Let me end my reflection on the positive note of Bertha von Suttner, again taken from her acceptance speech in Oslo in 1905. She quoted friend President Theodore Roosevelt who a year earlier had received her in the White House.

These are his words, and this is what she believed: “World peace is coming, it certainly is coming, but only step by step.”

Thank you