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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
Mr Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow

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Director-General
of the
United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization,
(Unesco)

on the occasion of the award of the International
Literacy Prizes
(International Literacy Day 1985)

Unesco House, 7 September 1985

Mr President of the General Conference,
Mr Chairman of the Executive Board,
Mr Chairman of the Jury,
Members of the Jury,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The ceremony that brings us together today is taking place exactly 20 years after the opening, on 8 September 1965 in Tehran, of the first World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy.

This year, as every year, international prizes are to be awarded, and I extend very warm greetings to this year's prize-winners, who have made an outstanding contribution to the struggle against illiteracy.

Illiteracy remains a worldwide problem in 1985. The number of illiterates aged 15 and above is estimated at some 889 million, or 27.7 per cent of the world population in this age-group. The regions worst affected are Africa, with 162 million illiterates and an illiteracy rate of 54 per cent, and Asia, with an illiteracy rate of 36.3 per cent and 666 million illiterates. Three-quarters of the illiterates in the world (or 669 million) are concentrated in nine countries.

Illiteracy is in the main a problem of the developing countries, where 869 million illiterates are to be found (93 per cent of the total adult illiterate population). But it also affects industrialized countries, where there are recognized to be 20 million illiterates and where the phenomenon of relapse into illiteracy or functional illiteracy is growing.

The provision of education for all is increasingly being regarded as both an ethical and a social imperative. It is proclaimed in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to be a basic human right, and it is a prerequisite for the full development of the individual and for the progress of all societies.

While synonymous neither with lack of culture nor with ignorance in civilizations based on oral tradition, illiteracy is increasingly proving, in the age in which we live, a major obstacle as regards access to scientific and technical knowledge and to the artistic and literary works of the different peoples.

According to the Declaration of Persepolis, proclaimed in 1975, literacy is not 'just the process of learning the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, but a contribution to the liberation of man and to his full development'.

It is, finally, a prerequisite for bringing the peoples of the world closer together, inasmuch as it promotes a clearer reciprocal awareness and a truer appreciation of their respective value systems - and, thereby, the mutual understanding that reinforces world peace.

It is for all these reasons that Unesco's Constitution assigns to the Organization the task of giving 'fresh impulse to popular education and the spread of culture; by co-operating with Members, at their request, in the development of educational activities; by instituting collaboration among the nations to advance the idea of equality of educational opportunity without regard to race, sex or any distinctions, economic or social; by suggesting educational methods best suited to prepare the children of the world for the responsibilities of freedom'.

Its global dimensions and its social and human implications make illiteracy a radical challenge for the international community - one which can be taken up only if that community is prepared to harness its best energies to the common task and if each individual country will play its own part.

It is for this reason - in this year which marks the fortieth anniversary of the creation of the United Nations and of the adoption of Unesco's Constitution and which has been designated International Youth Year - that I wish to appeal to the peoples of the world, and particularly to young people everywhere, to join together in working to achieve, between now and the end of the century, a decisive victory over illiteracy.

This will mean mobilizing all available energies and making special efforts at the subregional, regional and world level in the context of the countries concerned. Consideration might be given to new forms of co-operation that enable young people from the industrial and the developing countries to work together more closely in joint endeavours.

I have in mind an association linking universities in the various countries in support of literacy campaigns in the most underprivileged countries, or, perhaps, the participation of young people from a number of countries from both North and South in the struggle against illiteracy in some of the world's poorest regions.

Mr Chairman,
Members of the Jury,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The moment has come to award the international literacy prizes for 1985. I should like to express our admiration and gratitude to you, Mr Chairman, and to the Members of the Jury, to the prize-winners and to the candidates to whom it was not possible to make an award.

Mr Chairman, Members of the Jury, allow me to welcome Mrs Martha V. Mlagala Mvungi of the United Republic of Tanzania, who has agreed to join the International Jury as the representative of the Africa region.

Allow me also to pay a last tribute to the memory of the late Sulaiman Yousef Al-Mizband, Vice-Minister of Education of Iraq and a member of the Jury since 1982.

I should like, finally, to say how much the Organization appreciates, year after year, your work of selecting, from among so many praiseworthy candidates, the recipients of the prizes and honourable mentions.

It now gives me great pleasure to award the Nadezhda K. Krupskaya Prize, donated by the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; the International Reading Association Prize, donated by the Association of

that name; the Noma Prize, donated by the late Mr Shoichi Noma, a Japanese publisher; and the Iraq Prize, donated by the Government of Iraq - these four prizes having been established respectively in 1979, 1979, 1980 and 1981. I should like to express once again to the donors of these prizes my warm appreciation for this mark of international solidarity in support of literacy.