



SPEECH BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL ▲

Lisbon, 19 March 2007

Award ceremony of the North-South Prize of the Council of Europe

We are here to honour two very exceptional individuals, a woman from a small village in Pakistan and a priest from Holland. They come from two very different backgrounds, and, at first sight, their life stories have very little in common. But what they share is remarkable courage, energy and resolve to act against injustice and protect the dignity of their fellow human beings. And in my book, that counts more than any differences in gender, biography or geography.

People like Ms Mukhtar Mai and Father Francisco Van der Hoff are precious because they show how much can be done through personal engagement and faith in humanity.

The tragic personal story of Ms Mukhtar Mai is well known, but the point she has always made is that her suffering was not an isolated case. What is remarkable is her determination to fight back, to persist in her struggle not only against her tormentors but also against the circumstances which led to her ordeal. She understands that the only way to protect women from oppression, discrimination and violence is to empower them through education. Sympathy is good, but not good enough. What women need to protect themselves from becoming victims - whether they grow up in Pakistan, Poland or Portugal - is political empowerment and economic emancipation. Gender equality is a human right which not only liberates women; it liberates societies as a whole, and it allows them to prosper politically, economically and socially.

Ms Mukhtar Mai is a heroine, and I do not use this world lightly. In my name and on behalf of the North South Centre and the Council of Europe as a whole I should like to convey great respect and gratitude for her work in defending the universal values of human dignity and equality, which are also the values of the Council of Europe.

Father Francisco Van der Hoff is a farmer with a PhD. He not only believes in social justice and fair trade, he makes them happen. For more than a quarter of a century, he has been living and working with the Indian communities in Mexico, and has helped them to improve the production and marketing of coffee beans. He is behind the Max Havelaar Association and the fair trade label promoting trade which bypasses intermediaries, defends the social rights of the producers and protects their environment. He has since expanded his activities to other areas, but with a constant focus on socially-just and environmentally-friendly agriculture, industry and distribution. The work of Father Van der Hoof is of exceptional importance. What he has put in place is not a socially utopian experiment, but a functioning economic model which is not only fair, but also produces very good coffee. This is something I can vouch for personally because the Council of Europe cafeterias have been serving fair trade coffee for years.

The North South Prize of the Council of Europe is a modest token of appreciation for the work, the determination and the courage of our two laureates. I am honoured to be here today, and I should like to thank the Portuguese authorities, and especially the President of the Republic and the President of the Parliament, for their support, for their hospitality and for everything they have done to make it possible for me to share this very special and precious moment.

Thank you very much.