

Speech at Olof Palme Memorial Fund Prize Ceremony

Stockholm 29 February 2026

Dear friends,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and an honour welcoming you all to the Ceremony for the awarding of the Olof Palme Memorial Fund Prize 2026.

And we all want to extend a special, warm welcome to this year's two laureates;

- Navanthem Pillay and
- John Dugard.

Two exceptional champions of human rights.

Navi Pillay could not attend in person today because of her ongoing work for The International Court of Justice in The Hague. We will though meet her online.

John Dugard is present, and you can listen to this welcome applause to both of you.

Dear friends,

In these times Human Rights is challenged more than in a long time - meaning it is needed more than in a long time!

Navi Pillay and John Dugard are South Africans, a country that became a strong symbol for the struggle for human rights during the long period of a cruel, hated political system; apartheid.

So, it is in a way also natural that we - in these difficult times - still let ourselves be inspired by an important victory for human rights, more than thirty years ago.

And be inspired by two role models that for many years have shown the importance of perseverance in the defence of human rights.

One of the most important and powerful sources of inspiration in modern history is Nelson Mandela. Let me use one of his many inspiring quotes:

“Our common humanity transcends the oceans and all national boundaries. It binds us together to unite in a common cause against tyranny, to act together in defence of our very humanity.

Let it never be asked of anyone of us – what did we do when we knew that another was oppressed!”

Nelson Mandela’s message is this: human rights are universal and these rights must be protected by all of us, in our close neighbourhood, wherever we live.

And that we should never get ourselves into a situation of indifference, never neglect, never stay passive, never be silent if fellow citizens are abused.

This thought of universal human rights is timeless. Although the concept of a universal right formulated in a common global declaration was realized after the second world war - we know that thoughts in this line were expressed already among philosophers in Ancient Greece, more than 2000 years ago.

It was far from self-evident that concrete thoughts of Human Rights would develop. It was more like a slow start and gradual process, in the beginning aiming at liberating human beings - from submissively only obeying orders from God or nature to individuals with a free will, the right to criticize and make their own decisions.

Over centuries and centuries this process has been ongoing. And as we know, not until 1948 it was time for the world to come together and agree on how human rights should be expressed in one common document.

Eleanor Roosevelt, a strong advocate for human rights and the only woman in the committee that wrote the draft - but she chaired the committee. She coordinated and guided eight men in the work that resulted in an overwhelming majority of the United Nations General Assembly voting in favour of the Declaration

And the declaration is exactly as relevant today, 78 years later. That shows what a magnificent work the committee did - but it also shows that Human Rights are timeless. It shows its paramount importance.

After its preamble the declaration takes us straight to the point in Article 1, stating that *“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”*.

A total of 30 articles tells us what we have promised one another to respect and adhere to.

The last article also tells us what is not acceptable:

“Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein”.

Now, if the Declaration of Human Rights is the moral compass - the “why” – the world community also needs tools to ensure that we are walking in the direction of the compass needle. We need not least a legal handrail. That is the “how”, the task for the jurisdiction, as in any field or sector of a society

And lastly, the “why” and the “how” must be complemented by “who”, because Human Rights need constantly to be defended – something that not just happens. We ourselves need to take responsibility. It requires devoted and skilled individuals.

We, the peoples, are responsible for

Interpreting the whys in different situations

Holding individuals accountable when breaching the rights.

Conducting complex legal processes.

And for this, we are so grateful to fellow human beings that have devoted their lives in doing exactly that.

Friends,

To achieve a broad, deep and strong defence of crucial human postures - like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - it is important to get to the core of understanding, explaining the basic substance in a way that makes it as clear as possible.

Eleanor Roosevelt helped us on the way when she talked about human relations. She said:

“Tolerance ought only to be a preliminary step which allows us to get to know other people, and which prevents us from setting up bars, just because they may be of a different race or religion. The real value of any relationship is the fact that we learn to like people in spite of our differences.”

What we hear in this quote is the innermost meaning of human rights, of human laws, of humanity. Declarations remind us of why we want to act in certain ways and laws tell us how we should adhere to this and what should be the consequences if we don't.

But the most fundamental ingredient in all this is the genuine understanding of true relationships.

Dear friends,

Times are dire and difficult. But through history mankind has learned that very few things we wish for happens by itself, we must achieve it.

Again, on behalf of the Board of Olof Palme Memorial Fund- let me thank John Dugard and Navi Pillay for your lifelong commitment and contribution to the fundamental rights that demands equality between all human beings. Thank you for your tireless efforts in the spirit of Olof Palme.

And thank you all for listening!