

Peace and Reconciliations Award Acceptance Speech by

Victor Ochen,

Kampala, Uganda – 22nd February 2017

- Your excellency, Stephanie Rivioal, Ambassador of France to Uganda
- Your Excellency, Dr. Peter Blomeyer, the Ambassador of Germany to Uganda
- Your Excellency, Kristian Schmidt, the EU Ambassador to Uganda
- Your Excellency, the United States Ambassador to Uganda, such a wonder partner in great peace and justice
- Your Excellency, Rosa Malango, the United Nations Resident Coordinator to Uganda
- Bart Magunda Katurebe – Chief Justice of the Republic of Uganda
- Distinguished Heads and Members of Diplomatic Missions present
- Members of Civil Society Organisation, religious and cultural leaders present.

It's always good to reconnect and renew friendship, fellowships and partnerships, especially after a turbulent year 2016 which I know it's been difficult for most people. We overcame a lot last year, and 2017 looks more promising, and I wish you all a happy new year.

It's my sincere honour to be invited to witness the award ceremony, in commemoration of 54th anniversary of signing of the Elysee Treaty. As you know, the 1963 treaty was signed just a year when my country Uganda has just attained her independence in 1962. The Treaty didn't only end the rivalry between France and Germany. But it opened permanently the door for unity, peace and prosperity between the two nations. This is the spirit that would in later years inspire the growth of the most solid social-political and economic block, the European Union.

Today, I am personally humbled to be the recipient of this prestigious award for Peace and Reconciliation in 2017. As you might wonder, I was not the likeliest candidate to receive this recognition. But, along the years of painful struggles through my organisation the African Youth Initiative Network (AYINET) which I founded on the peak of war in northern Uganda, we have been able to mobilise and restore hope, healing and dignity of war wounded victims in northern Uganda.

Amidst the suffering, we resisted urge for revenge and passionately tried for many years. Being born and raised in northern Uganda, being inspired, being told that war is the only

pathway to power. This is the community I grew up in, this is the history I knew, this is the history we were trading on. Being born in this kind of situation, there is so much little chances to do better. It's always difficult to expect something magnificent come out of this debilitating frustrating life as a child. But, today I stand proud to say the initiative that we founded 12 years ago, has today reconstructive surgical treatments to over 10,000 victims whose lips, nears and nose were cut off. To date, over 10,000 direct victims of war whose lips, nose ears were cut off, survivors of rape, gun shots have been provided reconstructive surgeries to heal and regain their dignity.

Our work was never inspired by our hard earned education, because we didn't just study or researched about what we do, we lived and survived it and that's why we said we will support no more war, so that there is no more suffering.

Over the last years, we have been playing key roles in mobilising the victims of war throughout Uganda, from deep end of Kasese to Luwero, to Mbale, Arua, Gulu and Lira to participate in the national unity, peace and reconciliation processes through national transitional justice mechanisms. The common message we have heard from all over the country is "We have waited for too long". We have waited for too long to reconcile as a country.

Deep in my heart, I stand here to accept the Peace and Reconciliation award. Receiving this award is the truest recognition attained despite the most difficult life circumstances of growing up under the cloud of war. Above all our ability to resist temptation to fight back, and instead choosing to promote peace, justice and reconciliation. Thanks to French and German government and leadership for setting an exemplary that you can abandon permanent enmity and build permanent friendship, and this is the right seeds that everyone must plant for the future generation.

Uganda has had a difficult past, we have a history to heal and the future to protect. I believe we can reconcile and must reconcile as a country; and we have to reconcile now when we still have power to do so. And, proudly I want to dedicate this Peace and Reconciliation award to those victims of war, brothers and sisters whose stories have always inspired us to continue doing our best to restore their dignity. This award is yours!

Again, I want to thank French and German embassies in Uganda, all other development partners from United Nations to other member states of European Union and USAID present here, who have always generously in their unique ways supported our work to help victims heal and restore dignity. Thank you for collaborating with government of Uganda on national development programs too on strengthening pillars for peace, justice and accountability; especially as the government develop the transitional justice processes.

And, I always hear a very common statement that you must suffer to be successful. The question is, why must one suffer before he or she becomes a hero or successful? While I agree there are circumstances which are unavoidable, but suffering must not be normalised in our African society. It's time we must raise our heroes without another 27 years of humiliation in prison to become another Nelson Mandela. We must not allow children to painfully live again for 20 years of their childhood in war and IDP camps to become another Victor Ochen. This notion must change, we can't glorify suffering and every human must be accorded the opportunity to live life with dignity.

And, lastly because of too much wars and suffering in Africa, we have got so much death of people trying to escape the continent. Have you ever imagined what you would see if you scanned the depth of Mediterranean Sea! What would you see at the bottom of the Sea? Someone would say I could big fish. May be disappeared containers. But, to me at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, what you would see most are the skeletons of African people, who die every day trying to escape the continent. Its hurts!

My biggest call to all of us is, we have to work hard and address what compels these people to leave the continent. We must stay home and live life of dignity. I am not going anywhere; I will remain in Africa.

War has displaced us for too long, and now is the time to displace war forever from Africa.

Thank you,

God bless you

Victor Ochen
Executive Director
African Youth Initiative Network – AYINET