

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH AT THE AWARDING OF THE ROGER BALDWIN MEDAL OF LIBERTY PRIZE

Thank you Wade Henderson.

Thank you all. I am deeply moved. I hope I will have the composure to read the text I've prepared.

In receiving the Baldwin Award on behalf of ASADHO, I am overwhelmed by thoughts of my colleagues and my country. I am extremely pleased [to accept this award] on behalf of my colleagues at ASADHO and other human rights activists in the Congo. I believe they will see this award for what it is: a recognition of the value you place in their work and an encouragement to continue and to redouble their efforts to defend the freedoms in which we all believe.

With this in mind, I would like to note that ASADHO is receiving this prize eight years after political events that forced many of my colleagues, including all the leadership of the organization, into exile. They had to abandon their jobs and families in order to escape the violent persecution inflicted first upon them and subsequently upon the entire nation. It is in their name that I accept this award. I am but the messenger of an organization that, since its creation in 1991 by Mr. Guillaume Ngefa, has evolved into an institution in its own right, no longer reliant on any one individual or leader.

The last eight years have been particularly challenging for the organization. The chaos that followed the forced exile of our leadership almost plunged the organization into a lengthy period of inactivity. Thanks to the determination of all the members, we were able to avoid this predicament. In fact, the crisis provided us with an opportunity to make improvements: in our struggle to reorganize, we established, for the first time, a democratic congress that elects directors to the national office [in Kinshasa]. Elections were also organized in the regional branches. This award will enable us, I hope, to continue to promote the spirit of democratic debate that has always been at the heart of ASADHO.

Over the course of the last eight years, our organization has carefully tailored its actions to the political circumstances of the country. Armed conflict gave rise to widespread violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. Many of our leaders wanted to take advantage of the invasion of our country by foreign forces to increase repression and muzzle all criticism. Journalists and human rights activists in particular were targeted. During the first five years of the regimes of Laurent and Joseph Kabila, there were more journalist arrests and harassments than during Mobutu's thirty-year dictatorship. A sense of patriotic duty and a desire to avoid weakening the country in a time of war kept some from denouncing the government's human rights abuses. ASADHO chose not to follow this course. We believed, as we still believe, that human rights and basic freedoms must be protected at all times, especially in moments of political crisis. We have paid dearly for that conviction. One of my colleagues, Golden Misabiko, was imprisoned and tortured for six months without a trial for denouncing the execution of the dissident Masasu in November 2002. These repressive measures were

not restricted to the government in Kinshasa. Armed rebel groups pretending to combat the government and install democracy did not show a greater love for journalists and human rights organizations. While Golden was being tortured in Kinshasa, Boniface Musavuli and Hangi Talent, two of my colleagues from the region of Beni in the east of the country were being harassed by RCD-ML, a rebel group allied with Ugandan troops, and Me Nziwa was receiving death threats from armed groups in Ituri.

It is also on behalf of Golden Misabiko and all my other colleagues who have been victims of torture, threats and daily harassment that I accept this award.

This award comes at an especially difficult time in the history of my country. The human rights situation there is still very precarious. The political transition remains fragile, as evidenced by recent events in Bukavu and Kinshasa. The international community has invested great effort and resources into the ongoing process. The United Nations has established a very expensive peacekeeping force on the ground. Some governments have provided funding to create a unified army. Other governments are financing reconstruction projects and the rehabilitation of infrastructure. All have promised to help organize elections. There are other initiatives in the areas of health and judicial reform. But all of these accomplishments may vanish into thin air if the international community and Congolese authorities do not put as much effort into the fight against impunity.

Even though the international community believes that prosecution of those responsible for crimes committed during the conflict would disrupt the transition process, we hold that as long as impunity reigns there can be neither peaceful transition nor elections.

Today is an important date for our organization, marking two major events—the reception of this award and the ICC Prosecutor’s official announcement that the court will initiate investigations into the crimes perpetrated in the DRC since July 1, 2002.

ASADHO was involved in the earliest stages of the campaign to create a role for the International Criminal Court in the transition. Beginning in 2001, we successfully campaigned for the DRC government’s ratification of the Rome Statute and subsequently worked to identify crimes that could be the subject of investigations by the ICC. Human Rights First, Human Rights Watch, and the ICC NGO Coalition were with us at every step—in Kinshasa as in New York, in Lubumbashi as in Brussels—encouraging us, informing us, and aiding us in our efforts. We have learned a great deal from you and I hope you have also learned something from us.

I hope this award strengthens our professional ties, just as it consoles and rewards my colleagues at ASADHO and permits us to reflect on our next steps in the struggle against impunity in the Congo. I say to those who have given us this award: thank you, from the bottom of my heart, thank you, thank you.

Amigo Ngonde Funsu,
President