



Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the launching of
Höfði Reykjavík Peace Centre
8 October 2016

Dear guests

It is both an honour and pleasure to deliver the opening address at this occasion, when we formally launch the Höfði Reykjavík Peace Centre. As Iceland's President it is among my tasks to support positive initiatives of all kinds. Earlier today, to name one example, I addressed a symposium on child protection, certainly another praiseworthy subject. The focus there was on one of the most vulnerable groups in society, innocent children who have to face a cruel world.

We must help individuals but we also need to look at the wider picture. Every day we read and hear about wars and violence in many parts of the globe. Children are not spared, hospitals are considered legitimate targets. At present, the world's attention is mostly on the atrocious conflict in Syria. What can be done? What can you do? What can I do?

Unfortunately, there are no easy answers. As a private citizen, I can alleviate my anger, sadness, frustration and guilt by donating a small sum of money to charities, perhaps sign a petition. As President I can lend my support to initiatives of this kind, give voice to those who have none. And, in Syria, surely the international community could and should act. We need to do everything in our power to end the violence, at least to spare the children, spare the hospitals, and allow neutral volunteer units to deliver food and medical supplies to innocent victims of war.

At this initial symposium of the Höfði Reykjavík Peace Centre, the focus will be on citizens, cities, peace and power. Why Iceland, why Reykjavík, why Höfði? To our guests from abroad, I could say "Welcome

to Iceland, the land of the Vikings”, and alarm bells might ring. We Icelanders often pride ourselves on our Viking past. It could be argued, however, that the Vikings were the terrorists of their time, murderous villains who should not be revered at all. Actually, the story is more complex. The Vikings were also merchants and tradesmen, and when the settlement of Iceland began in earnest, the Viking Age was nearing its end. If anything, Iceland was mostly a retirement home for a few Vikings who had to content themselves with telling tales about their alleged heroics abroad.

We should also keep in mind that we Icelanders have never suffered from large-scale wars on our soil. Yes, the country was ravaged by civil strife in the thirteenth century and unrest lingered on. Still, the weaponry was primitive, throwing stones was at times the preferred way of fighting. In the twentieth century, Iceland was not a direct party in the two world wars. In 1945, the country could not be a founding member of the United Nations because the government refused to declare war on the then defeated Axis powers. It was felt that since Iceland had no army, such a move would be empty and futile.

A few years later, Iceland joined NATO, however, accepted the presence of US forces on the island, siding with the West in the Cold War. Somewhat ironically, the most serious disputes Iceland then had to face were with Britain, the so-called Cod Wars, when Royal Navy frigates and other vessels tried to protect British trawlers from harassment by the Icelandic Coast Guard in the waters off Iceland. It could be argued that we then saw Iceland’s only contribution to weaponry in the world, a special cutting device which severed the fishing nets from the trawlers.

Then came the end of the Cold War. Just like we Icelanders can not and should not call ourselves the land of the Vikings we should not maintain that the Cold War came to an end here in Iceland, or that we ourselves had a pivotal role to play on the world stage. Yet we can proudly point to the fact that it was here in Reykjavík, at Höfði House, that Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev had a very important meeting of minds. True, they controlled vast armies, and they wanted to preserve their power, but they also desired peace.

Höfði House, the setting of the Reykjavík Summit, that historic occasion, has become a symbol for the search for peace and disarmament. Let us use that symbol for good. There is an Icelandic saying that words come first, orð eru til alls fyrst. We were no Vikings but we could tell Viking tales. We have had no direct experience of war but we have empathy. And now we can offer a venue for words to end wars.