

## **Speech by Yelena Bonner**

**Oslo, Norway**

**May 19, 2009**

**Good day Ladies and Gentlemen, Good day friends.**

**In his invitation to this conference, the president of the forum, Thor Halvorsen, asked me to talk about my life, the suffering I have endured, and how I was able to bear it all. But today all that seems to me rather unnecessary. So I will say only a few words about myself.**

**At the age of 14, I was left without my parents. My father was executed, my mother spent 18 years in prison and exile. My grandmother raised me and my younger brother. The poet Vladimir Kornilov, who suffered the same fate, wrote: “And it felt that in those years we had no mothers. We had grandmothers.” There were hundreds of thousands of such children. The writer Ilya Ehrenburg called us “the strange orphans of 1937”.**

**Then came the war. My generation was cut off nearly at the roots by the war, but I was lucky. I came back. I came back to an empty house. My grandmother had died of starvation in the siege of Leningrad. Then came life in a communal apartment, six half-hungry years of medical school, falling in love, two children, and the poverty of a Soviet doctor. But I was not alone in this. Everyone lived that way.**

**And then there was my dissident years followed by exile. But Andrei and I were together! And that was true happiness.**

**Today, when I am 86, I try to sum up my life every day that I am still alive. And in summing up my life, I can do so in three words. My life was typical, tragic, and beautiful. Whoever needs the details — read my two books, *Alone Together* and *Mothers and Daughters*. They have been translated into many languages. Read *Sakharov’s Memoirs*. It’s a pity his *Diaries* haven’t been translated; they were published in Russian in Russia in 2006. Apparently, the Western publishers, or the West for that matter aren’t very much interested nowadays in Sakharov.**

It also seems that the West isn't very interested in Russia either. Russia, a country that no longer has real elections, independent courts, or freedom of the press. Russia is a country where journalists, human rights activists, and migrants are killed regularly, almost daily. And extreme corruption flourishes of a kind and extent that never existed earlier in Russia or anywhere else. So what do the Western mass media discuss mainly? Gas and oil — of which Russia has a lot. Energy is its only political trump card, and Russia uses it as an instrument of pressure and blackmail. And there's another topic that never disappears from the newspapers — who rules Russia? Putin or Medvedev? But what difference does it make? Russia has completely lost the impulse for democratic development that we thought we saw in the early 1990s. Russia will remain that way, the way it is now for decades, unless there is some violent upheaval.

During the years since the fall of the Berlin wall, the world has experienced incredible changes in an exceptionally short period. But has the world become better, or more prosperous for the six billion eight hundred million people who live on our small planet? No one can answer that question unambiguously, despite all the achievements of science and technology and that process which we customarily call "progress". It seems to me that the world has become more alarming, more unpredictable, and more fragile. This alarm, unpredictability, and fragility are felt to some extent by all countries and all individuals. And civic and political life becomes more and more virtual, like a picture on a computer screen.

Even so, the picture of life, formed by television, newspaper, or radio remains the same — there is no end to the conferences, summits, forums, and competitions, contests from beauty pageants to sandwich eating contests. They say people are coming together — but in reality, they are growing apart.

And that isn't because an economic depression suddenly burst forth, and swine flu to boot. This began on September 11, 2001. At first, we saw anger and horror provoked by the terrorists who knocked down the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and by their accomplices

**in London, Madrid and other cities, and by the shaheeds, suicide bombers who blew themselves up at public spaces like discotheques and wedding parties for which their families have received a reward from Saddam Hussein of \$25,000 per family per act. Later, President Bush was blamed for everything, and as always, the Jews — that is, Israel. An example was the first Durban Conference, and the growth of anti-Semitism in Europe, noted several years ago in a speech by Romano Prodi. Then there was Durban-2; the main speaker**

**Page 3**

**was Ahmadinejad proposing to annihilate Israel. So it is about Israel and the Jews that I wish speak. And not only because I am Jewish, but above all because the Middle Eastern conflict since the end of World War II has been a platform for political games and gambling by the great powers, the Arab countries and individual politicians, striving, through the so-called “peace process,” to make a name for themselves, and perhaps win a Nobel Peace Prize. At one time, the Nobel Peace Prize was the highest moral award of our civilization. But after December 1994, when Yasir Arafat became one of the three new laureates, its ethical value was undermined. I haven’t always greeted each selection of the Nobel Committee of the Norwegian Storting with joy, but that one shocked me. And to this day, I cannot understand and accept the fact that Andrei Sakharov and Yasir Arafat, now both posthumously, share membership in the club of Nobel laureates.**

**In many of Sakharov’s publications, Andrei spoke and wrote about Israel in his book Progress, Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom and My Country and the World, and in his articles and in his interviews. I have a collection of citations of his writing on this topic. If it were published in Norway, then many Norwegians would be surprised at how sharply their contemporary view of Israel differs from the view of Sakharov.**

**A few quotes from Sakharov:**

**“Israel has an indisputable right to exist.” “Israel has a right to existence within safe borders.” “All the wars that Israel has waged have been just, forced upon it by the irresponsibility of Arab leaders.” And finally, “With all the money that has been invested in the problem of Palestinians, it would have been possible long ago to resettle them and provide them with good lives in Arab countries.”**

**Throughout the years of Israel's existence there has been war. Victorious wars, and also wars which Israel was not allowed to win. Each and every day — literally every day — there is the expectation of a terrorist act or a new war. We have seen the Oslo Peace Initiatives and the Camp-David Hand-shake and the Road-map and Land for Peace, mind you, there is not much land — from one side of Israel on a clear day you can see the other side with your naked eye.**

**Now, there is a new motif is fashionable in fact it's an old one: "Two states for two peoples." It sounds good. And there is no controversy in the peace-making Quartet, made up of the U.S., the**

**Page 4**

**UN, the EU, and Russia. In parenthesis let me note, Russia, some great peace-maker, with its Chechen war and its Abkhazian-Ossetian provocation. The Quartet, and the Arab countries, and the Palestinian leaders, both Hamas and Fattah put additional demands to Israel. I will speak only of one demand: that Israel take back the Palestinian refugees. And here a little discourse of history and demography is needed.**

**According to the official UN official definition, refugees are considered those who fled from violence and wars — but not their descendants who are born in another land. At one time the Palestinian refugees and the Jewish refugees from Arab countries were about equal in number — about 700,000 to 800,000 people. The newly-created state of Israel took in Jews, about 600,000 people. They were officially recognized as refugees by UN Resolution 242, but not provided with any UN assistance. Palestinians, however, are considered refugees not only in the first generation, but in the second, third, and now even in the fourth generation. According to the report of the UN Works and Relief Agency's report, the number of registered Palestinian refugees has grown from 914,000 in 1950 to more than 4.6 million in 2008, and this number continues to rise due to natural population growth. All these people have the rights of Palestinian refugees and are eligible to receive humanitarian aid. The entire population of Israel is about 7.5 million people, of which there are about 2.5 million ethnic Arabs who call themselves Palestinians. Imagine Israel then, if another five million Arabs flood into it; Arabs would substantially outnumber the Jewish population. The result would be both strange and terrifying. Not only because Israel will essentially be destroyed, after all, that**

time has passed and these Jews will not allow to be slaughtered. It is terrifying to see the short memory of the august peace-making quartet, their leaders and their citizens if they let this happen. Because the plan two states for two peoples is the creation of one state ethnically cleansed of Jews, and a second one with the potential to do the same thing. A Judenfrei Holy Land - the dream of Adolph Hitler come true at last. So think again, those who are still able, who heed this call, who has a fascist inside him today? And another question that has been a thorn for me for a long time. It's a question for my human rights colleagues. Why doesn't the fate of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit trouble you in the same way as the fate of the Guantanamo prisoners?

You fought for and won the opportunity for the International Committee of the Red Cross, journalists, and lawyers to visit Guantanamo. You know prison conditions, the prisoners' everyday

Page 5

routine, their food. You have met with prisoners subjected to torture. The result of your efforts has been a ban on torture and a law to close this prison. President Obama signed it in the very first days of his coming to the White House. And although he, like President Bush before him, does not know what to do with the Guantanamo prisoners, there is hope that the new Administration will think up something.

But during the two years Shalit has been held by terrorists, the world human rights community has done nothing for his release. Why? He is a wounded soldier, and fully falls under the protection of the Geneva Conventions. The Conventions say clearly that hostage-taking is prohibited, that representatives of the Red Cross must be allowed to see prisoners of war, especially wounded prisoners, and there is much else written in the Geneva Conventions about Shalit's rights. The fact that representatives of the Quartet conduct negotiations with the people who are holding Shalit in an unknown location, in unknown conditions, vividly demonstrates their scorn of international rights documents and their total legal nihilism. Do human rights activists also fail to recall the fundamental international rights documents?

And yet I still think, and some will find this naïve, that the first tiny, but real step toward peace must become the release of Shalit. Release — not exchange for 1000 or 1,500 prisoners who are in Israeli prisons serving court sentences for real crimes.

**Returning to my question of why human rights activists are silent, I can find no answer except that Shalit is an Israeli soldier. Shalit is a Jew. So again, it is conscious or unconscious anti-Semitism. Again, it is fascism.**

**Thirty-four years have passed since the day when I came to this city to represent my husband, Andrei Sakharov, at the 1975 Nobel Prize ceremony. I was in love with Norway then. The reception I received filled me with joy. Today, I feel Alarm and Hope, this is the title Sakharov used for his 1977 essay written at the request of the Nobel Committee.**

**Alarm because of the anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli sentiment growing throughout Europe and even further afield. And yet, I hope that countries, their leaders, and people everywhere will recall and adopt Sakharov's ethical credo: "In the end, the moral choice turns out to be also the most pragmatic choice."**

**Thank you very much.**

**END**