

First Lady Jeannette Kagame's Address at the

Global Citizen Forum

“Opportunities in the age of uncertainty”

Sveti Stefan, Montenegro

19 October 2017

**Honorable Prime Minister of Montenegro,
Mr. Armand Arton, Founder of the Global Citizen Forum,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,**

Good afternoon.

I wish to start by thanking the Government of Montenegro for their warm hospitality, and express my gratitude to the Global Citizen Forum, for inviting me to join a gathering that

illustrates the limitless power of humankind, when we decide to come together, and act as one.

We salute the sheer ingenuity of creating a platform, upon which every individual, every community, every nation can contribute its skills, its knowledge, its resources or time in a concerted, but simple manner, to make life more bearable for someone else.

You have taken a leap of faith and made a seemingly impossible dream possible: that of resolving humanity's greatest and most pressing challenges. You have appealed to the better judgment of man, and awakened us all to the inter-connectedness of the human experience, and you have demonstrated that our empathy, compassion, and determination, could well become the driving force to repair the world. And for that, I truly applaud you.

Esteemed guests,

Truth be told, as humans we have repeatedly stumbled – and at times fallen - in our march towards better tomorrows. In a world often perceived through the lenses of scarcity and through that, which separates us, the fear of the unknown has too often created a conducive environment, for parochialism and intolerance.

As if that weren't enough, the fear of uncertainty, has blurred the lines between perception and reality, where hardships are deemed to be insurmountable, and '*every man for himself*' becomes the philosophy of life. In Rwanda, our harrowing experience taught us just how far, ugly, damaging, and fatal, fabricated fears and perceived threats could be. You see, in colonial and post-colonial Rwanda, the guiding principle of the carefully crafted propaganda, was to create suspicion and hatred so as to pit groups against one other. This eventually led to the Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994,

whereby the politics of division that had gradually weaved its way into the everyday lives of Rwandans, culminated in one of the worst tragedies ever, to befall the human race. Indeed, it is ranked the fastest and sixth highest Genocide by death toll in the category of mass killings, recognized as genocides by legal definition in significant academic studies.

One million lives were brutally cut short, through a hateful wave of killings that would mark the psyche of our nation for generations to come. Hundreds of thousands of women were

viciously raped, and subsequently infected with HIV/AIDS; while 50,000 widows and 75,000 orphans survived the tragedy. The physical wounds have since healed, but the emotional scars still linger.

And in the midst of our nation's total collapse in 1994, the world came face to face with one of the biggest refugee crises, as 2 million people fled to a neighboring country, and were used as human shields by the very same regime running away from justice, for planning, and executing this Genocide.

Those 100 days of total darkness also saw the total failure of the concept of ‘global citizenship’ and its needed civic responsibility. As our people were left to die, despite the countless proofs that a genocide was happening, we saw thousands of international peacekeepers pulled out of Rwanda, and pets evacuated instead of innocent civilians.

For us, the trauma is all the harsher, if we consider that in pre-colonial times, the Tutsi, Hutu and Twa who make up the ethnic fabric of the Rwandan society, had been living

together for centuries in a peaceful environment. We were neighbors, practiced the same religion, and spoke the same language.

Distinguished audience,

Despite such strong ancestral ties, today we all know, and only too well, how fear, uncertainty and risk, can quickly become that whirlpool that stirs up the most basic of instincts in human beings.

Now, fast forward one hundred days later and the Genocide against the Tutsi finally comes to an end, on 4 July 1994.

The new government was faced with the hardest test of leadership, as they answered the call to help our nation rise out of the ashes of genocide, guided by a strong moral compass, in their vision of a dignified nation, that deserved to be revived. A nation in which, Rwandans, cultivated the mindset, that we jointly owned our future, and the path leading to it, when facing these bare choices:

- to give in to a natural instinct to revenge;
- to perceive our challenges as insurmountable, then give in to them and sink;
- to see the enormous challenges before us as opportunities; transcend the artificial lines drawn up for us; and dream bigger and better.

And as well put by President Paul Kagame on the 20th Commemoration of the Genocide, we, as a nation made 3 choices:

- We chose to stay together,
- We chose to be accountable to ourselves,
- We chose to think big.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Rwandans embraced this new mindset, which empowered them with the ability to shape their future.

We viewed education as a powerful tool, able to drive the advancement of entire communities, so we also focused on increasing the number of primary, secondary, and tertiary education institutions to help realize the economic and social transformation, envisioned in our national development plans.

Whereas in the pre-1994 era, Rwanda only saw about 2,500 university graduates through the years; the post-1994 era saw increased concerted efforts between government and civil society, to put in place 46 public and private tertiary education institutions¹, allowing close to 100,000 students to become university graduates.

In this new era, we also privileged a mindset framed in the country's broader transformation into an open society, where

¹ Education Statistical Yearbook 2016, MINEDUC

unnecessary boundaries were dissolved. This also took the form of a ‘rapprochement’ with our larger African family and the rest world, by making it easier to travel to, and do business in our country. Today, Africans who come to Rwanda receive visas upon arrival, while non-Africans are issued visas with ease, through online services, and based on reciprocal agreements with their respective countries.

As a rule, we believe in building bridges with all peoples and cultures, despite, or perhaps because of, a past marked by exclusion for many of us, who grew up in Rwanda or in exile.

This reasoning led our country to work towards the repatriation of Rwandan refugees to their home country, by establishing socio-economic programmes facilitating their return to Rwanda, ahead of the cessation clause of Rwandan refugee status, set for the end of December 2017.

We also believe that there is more to be gained at a human and economic level, by opening up to others. That is why we made a conscious decision to allow Rwandans to hold a double citizenship, to advocate for a no-visa policy within Africa, in line with our continental policy for Free Movement of People, Goods and Services, and more generally, to simplify travel processes for every visitor.

And as our terrible past shaped our attitude towards other global conflicts, we resolutely decided to play our part, in the protection of other threatened populations.

We have for instance welcomed hundreds of thousands of refugees and provided them, with access to the same education and health programmes services that our citizens benefit from, as we believe that refugees or not, they are human beings, who deserve nothing less than to be treated with dignity.

Rwanda has also now become one of the leading troop contributors to the UN and African Union peacekeeping missions, ranking as the 5th largest contributor at the global level, and 2nd in Africa.

Esteemed audience,

Ownership, responsibility and connectedness are as many values that make us good citizens, as they qualify us as good global citizens. In Rwanda, cultural values and tenets

underpin the principles of political and economic governance, and guide the formulation of key policies and programmes. This was the same for national unity and reconciliation, which we have experienced to be the surest way of eliciting buy-in from Rwandans.

From a legal perspective, with hundreds of thousands of genocide perpetrators to be tried, the modern courts would have needed around a hundred years, to complete all cases.

Those years also saw the abolition of the death penalty, and the use of traditions-inspired courts called '**Gacaca**', to accelerate legal proceedings, eradicate the culture of impunity, and help reconcile Rwandans. As a result, all the registered accused were tried and almost 2 million judgments passed, before the Gacaca courts closed in 2014.

Other initiatives accompanying our healing process were the ***Ndi Umunyarwanda*** or 'I am Rwandan', which called upon all of us to take a harsh look at our past, and focused on the

promotion of common (not divisive) values shaping our Rwandan-ness, that is our sense of belonging to the Rwandan nation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We know that what we have experienced as Rwandans, happened in other places and times, and is also happening as we speak. That is the terrible commonality of the human experience. Yet, looking at my own country and how

far we have come today, behooves me to leave you with words of hope.

When we become aware of the risks of giving in to misplaced fears rather than betting on the benefits of peace;

When we understand that ‘races’ are not biological but rather, that we, as humans, make just one big ‘race’, with more similarities than differences;

When we accept that in the grand scheme of things, we are more together, than the sum of each of us alone;

Then it becomes possible to turn fearful circumstances into great opportunities, because then fear disappears from the equation, and love and oneness takes its place.

We must continue to push the boundaries of division, advocate for empathy and inclusion, require our leaders to be accountable to the level of responsibility attached to their

office, and ultimately, act upon the certainty that ***“It’s never too late to be what you should have been”***, and that global citizenry is indeed, a goal well within our reach.

I thank you for your kind attention.