

A WORD OF WELCOME

BY H. E. LENNART MERI, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA,
TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION INVESTIGATING CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY
IN ESTONIA. IN KADRIORG, ON 26 JANUARY 1999

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome the members of the commission to Tallinn for your first meeting. It is the Commission's task to set down its objectives and to determine the scope of its work. The creation of this commission reflects our hope in Estonia that shining the bright light of truth on some of the tragedies of the past will not only contribute to reconciliation within our society and its further reintegration into the international community of nations but also help to prevent the repetition of such tragedies elsewhere.

All of us have been horrified by the recent events in Kosovo. But we in Estonia look on the discovery of mass graves of civilians with particular horror and concern. We should never forget that it was here in our country, in the village of Palermo near Rakvere, not far from Tallinn, that the first mass graves of this new kind of horror were uncovered in December 1918. It was then that the public first heard this word and saw the pictures of mass graves. These graves contained the bodies not of military combatants but of ordinary men, women, children and elderly people, whose only crime was membership in a community some had defined as an enemy. And the appearance of such graves ushered in a period of total war and totalitarianism, the twin evils of our time that gave birth to these and other crimes against humanity.

It is our goal, our endeavour, to prevent the repetition of such crimes in the future. Any effort in this direction requires that we face up to them squarely and sincerely, recognizing why certain events took place and also who was involved.

That is not an easy task. On the one hand, those who committed these crimes in all their variety did not rush to take credit for them. Indeed, we cannot but acknowledge the crisis of humanity, the crisis of humane values. Because those guilty of such crimes did and do everything to cover them up not only from the rest of the world but also from their own people. They disposed of witnesses, destroyed documents, falsified history, and introduced an Orwellian language that made it possible to hide almost everything from almost everyone's eyes.

Secondly. We live in the world and at an age when all too many people often appeal to reconciliation and forgiveness of the public, and in the name of this noble goal, argue that we should always look to the future rather than focus on the past. They suggest that whatever happened is part of history and should be left to the historians. They argue that stirring up past injustices is virtually certain to generate the conditions out of which others, perhaps even worse, will grow. And they assert that even with the best will in the world, it is not possible to sort out everything that happened in the past. Instead, they argue that it is enough to assert moral truths without examining the cases in which those truths were violated.

This commission represents a repudiation of both these points of view. While its members certainly recognize how daunting the task before them is, they are committed to ascertaining the facts about crimes against humanity that took place in Estonia during the age of the twentieth century totalitarians. The members of this commission bring to their work a variety of knowledges and skills that should allow them to begin their work with confidence. And we in Estonia will do everything we can to help them. Indeed, it is my happy task to take this opportunity to thank the large number of Estonians who have already made a contribution to the efforts of the commission.

And what is far more important, the work of this commission reflects our common conviction that we cannot build a free and democratic future without facing up to the past. Trying to sweep past events under the rug of collective forgetfulness will not help us to achieve either reconciliation or progress toward a better future. Doing so will not prevent such horrors from being repeated. Instead, ignoring what happened in the name of whatever short-term goals will guarantee that we will be living in a house built on sand, one certain to collapse during the next storm.

We will not build our house on sand, and this is the reason why we in Estonia have organized this commission and look forward to the results of its work. But in saying this, I want to make it very clear what we hope the commission will do and what we and the members of the commission know it will not do.

This commission is committed to setting out in as clear terms as possible what crimes against humanity happened in Estonia. It is committed to overcoming the stereotypes about groups that were the basis of many of these crimes: After all, most of these crimes were possible only because some governments and movements used stereotypes in place of the uniqueness of the human person in their dealings with others. It is committed to eliminating any double standards in the assessment of particular events. Crimes against humanity are crimes against humanity regardless of who commits them. And it is committed to compiling a record sufficiently well-documented and complete that no one will be able to deny what happened or to avoid facing up to the facts.

But at the same time, the commission is not and does not intend to act as a judicial or prosecutorial body. Its members are not judges and do not intend to act as such. They are not trying to compile a set of facts in order to launch judicial actions against anyone or any institution, either here in Estonia or elsewhere. Any decision to take such a step properly lies exclusively with the legal system of the Republic of Estonia and with the institutions of international justice.