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Text of French President Nicolas Sarkozy's Speech at CRIF

PRÉSIDENCE
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Speech by the President of the French Republic
Annual Dinner of the CRIF (Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France)
Pavillon d'Armenonville – Wednesday, 13 February 2008

Mr President,
Mr Prime Minister,
Former Prime Ministers,
Ministers and former ministers,
Mr President of the Senate,
Mr President of the National Assembly,
Mr Mayor of Paris,
Mr Ambassador of Israel to France,
Madam representative of the Palestinian Authority,
Ladies and gentlemen representatives of the different religions,

And if I may, over and above our differences, dear friends,

I have attended the CRIF dinner many times in the past. I know this tradition well. I know that for you it is a time for celebration, a time for getting together, a time for sharing. I also know that, every year, openly, as in your speech Mr President, or more discreetly in your hearts and in the privacy of your conversations, you remember, with this dinner, the tragic circumstances that led the different elements of French Judaism to unite in 1943 to combat the appalling persecution to which the Jews were subject at the time. From this covert union the CRIF was later born.

Memory has always been a fundamental characteristic of your identity. Because your entire culture and history are rooted in memory. The memory of God's alliance with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. For believers, this is first and foremost the memory of a promise, the memory of a hope, the memory of a Law, handed down from generation to generation, despite the adversity, despite the relegation, despite the pogroms, despite the deportation, despite the persecution. For each and every one of you, believers and non-believers, practising and non-practising, it is also today the memory of an exceptional and tragic destiny whose most recent chapters have scattered your families, wounded your hearts and sometimes even shaken your beliefs.

Judaism has made a major contribution to the history of humanity. The Jews were not only the first to show how steadfastly a people can stand by their God. They were also the first to show how a God can stand by his people. For the Jewish religion, memory is a trait of God, before it is a trait of men.

This revelation changed humanity's perception of religion, since a God who remembers is a God who loves. Never again, after the Torah, did men speak of God as they spoke before.

By inviting the Nation's highest authorities to share this commemorative and celebratory dinner every year, by inviting, in particular, the Prime Minister and, this year, for the first time, if I have understood correctly, the President of the Republic – some were invited, but were unable to attend – you therefore intend, you the Jews of France, to renew your firm allegiance to the Republic and to France, this France that emancipated you, that gave you rights, and that enabled you to practise your religion, and I will come back to this. We will be celebrating together this year the bicentenary of the creation of the Central Consistory and this Republic that subsequently integrated you into all spheres of society solely on the basis of your talents and your merits, this Republic that you have served with the generosity, trust and commitment that form the very spirit of true patriots, this Republic that we celebrate and that enables you to be both deeply attached to your faith, to your identity, and deeply attached to the Nation.

Yet by seating the representatives of the Jewish institutions of France and the representatives of the Republic around the same tables every year, you also intend to remind the latter of the duties of their office, the demands of their function, the principles, values and virtues whose violation, in the past, plunged our country into its darkest days. At a time when the most criminal ideologies were descending on Europe, it is a fact that the Republic of then betrayed you. Turning its back on its fundamental principles, not just those of 1905, but also those of 1789, of Abbé Grégoire, of whom you spoke, and of the Edict of Nantes, our Nation crumbled from the top down, like a fish rotting from the head down. It is healthy that your guests gathered in this room, some of whom exercise eminent responsibilities, should remember these painful moments that hurled so many families headlong into abomination and our country into shame.

Mr President, you were born in Gdansk and I cannot help thinking what it means to be a newborn Jew in Poland in 1945. Your birth is a kind of miracle in itself, as are the loyalty and attachment that

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the Jews of France have always shown our country, despite the betrayals they have been made to suffer. Even in 1940, when Vichy enacted the despicable Jewish Statutes, you knew that the Republic was not party to this crime and that eternal France was greater than its error of the moment. One defeat does not cancel out an entire history, one extraordinary measure might obscure, but cannot abolish our rights and our indefeasible duties, much less our feelings of being French above all else. As the Jews of France said at the time: "The only comfort we have is that which is born of an unshakeable faith in a sure return to the true spiritual destiny of this eternal France, of this torch-bearing nation." Such are the words that your predecessors, government servants and heads of the Central Consistory, used to implore the authorities at the time to remain loyal to the republican principles. This faith, this loyalty to the French Nation by the Jews of France, commands respect and admiration. As Head of State, it is my duty to bear witness to this.

I thank you, Mr President, for focusing the beginning of your speech on secularism. You have given me the opportunity – which I would have taken anyway – to respond to the many comments made about the speeches I gave recently in the Basilica of Saint-Jean de Latran, where I was so proud to be invited, and in Saudi Arabia, where I believed it was so important to speak the words Jews and Israel.

You said, Mr President, that you do not believe religions to be the only defence against evil, and you are right. Allow me to add, since I believe that I too know the history of the Jews of Europe, that although religions are indeed powerless to protect men from hatred and barbarity, the Godless world that Nazism and Communism sought to build did not really prove preferable.

The tragedy of the 20th century, of those millions of human beings plunged into war, starvation, hatred, separation, deportation and death, was not born from an excess of the idea of God, but from his awesome absence. Communism saw religion as an instrument of domination of one class over another, and we know full well the misfortunes to which this theory led. Nazism believed in racial hierarchy, a premise radically at odds with Judaeo-Christian monotheistic teaching.

Now, it is true that among the Resistance fighters, among the patriots, among the Righteous, there were just as many believers as non-believers. And it is just as true that among those who betrayed the Jews and who took part, directly or indirectly, in the implementation of the final solution, there were those who said they were Christian. Yet there is not one line in the Torah, the Gospels or the Koran that, when seen in its context and the fullness of its meaning, will stand for the massacres committed in Europe in the 20th century in the name of totalitarianism and in the name of a world without God. It is my right to defend this conviction.

The attachment to secularism, which is merely the expression, in religious circles, of the respect and tolerance we owe the beliefs of others, should lead each and every one of us, as I have done with your speech Mr President, to pay the closest attention to exactly what I said in Rome and Riyadh. These issues are too important, too fundamental to allow approximations, confusion and compression.

I never said that secular morals were inferior to religious morals. My conviction, you see, is that they are complementary and that, when it is hard to distinguish good from evil, which, at the end of the day, does not happen that often, it is helpful to look to both one and the other. The first preserves the established certitudes and brings its rationality. The second compels each man, each society, each era to not see themselves solely as their own end.

And I never said that the teacher was inferior to the priest, the rabbi or the imam in passing on values. But they simply do not represent the same thing. The first, the teacher, represents secular morals made up of honesty, tolerance and respect. What would people say if teachers took it upon themselves to represent religious morals? The second, the priest, the rabbi or the imam stands for a transcendence whose credibility is all the greater in that it takes the form of a particular way of life to which one is entirely devoted.

I would like all our children to receive an education in secular morals at school. I note, in this regard, that having quite rightly stopped official education in religious morals, we also stopped teaching secular morals. This is why I defend the idea that the two moralities are, evidently, complementary.

Yet I maintain, because I deeply believe it, that our children also have the right to meet, at some point in their intellectual and human education, committed religious representatives who open their minds to the spiritual question and the notion of God.

God can be an interesting idea, interesting enough, in any case, to make its mark on immense civilisations and the lives of billions of human beings. Life, death, the meaning of life, the origin of man, the purpose of man. There is not one man, not one woman, believer or non-believer, who does not ask these questions. I think that if our children can, at some point in their lives, be initiated into these questions, it is better than if they can't. They will do what they like with it, but no one has the right to think for them.

No one wants to put secularism in issue. No one wants to damage this invaluable treasure that is the neutrality of the State, respect for all beliefs, including non-belief, the freedom to practise and the freedom to be atheist. No one wants to renounce merit, talent and devotion to the country as the only virtues the Republic recognises and rewards.

Yet should that prevent us from talking about religion? Should it blind us to the point of ignoring that there is clearly, following the end of the totalitarian ideologies and the disillusion of the consumer society, a huge demand for spirituality and meaning? Should it prevent us from looking lucidly, dear Dalil Boubakeur, at the situation of Islam of France, which I much prefer to Islam in France?

Should it divert us from the role we can play to further dialogue between the civilisations, as I did in Riyadh, when this dialogue is of major importance to the 21st century? Should it deprive me, because I am President of the Republic, of the right to meet priests, ministers, rabbis, religious representatives, to tell them that what they do for the poor, what they do to comfort the sick, to educate young people, to rehabilitate prisoners is quite simply useful and good? Are they second-rate citizens? Should it oblige the President of the Republic, if he is to be republican, to talk

only about road safety, purchasing power, and planning without ever mentioning what could be seen as basics such as life, civilisation, love and hope? Have we become so sectarian and blind as to ban these fundamental questions from the political arena?

Fifty years after Malraux said the 21st century would be spiritual or would not be at all, fifteen years after we heard François Mitterrand confess to believing in spiritual forces, are we really gauging the intellectual might that could come crashing down on our country if we can take umbrage at a President in office saying quite simply that religious hope remains an important question for humanity, and that to believe in something is sometimes better than to believe it's all the same? Here, dear friends, is what I said in Rome and Riyadh. Nothing more, nothing less. And, as the saying goes, I'm sticking to it!

Mr President, you were kind enough to point out that I stood up as a friend of Israel at a time when it was better to avoid such a stance. As it so happens that some of Israel's friends tend to be fair-weather friends. Personally, I don't hold a barometer up to this friendship. It's good no matter what the weather. You see, at that time, I expressed my convictions with the same sincerity as that which led me to develop, intellectually speaking, a point of view of secularism, a few months before the presidential elections. Yes, it's true, I'm a friend of Israel and I attach great importance to forming closer political bonds, friendship and co-operation between our two countries.

2007 was an intense and productive year for the relationship between France and Israel. I wanted to see the political relationship improve and the development of a bilateral strategic dialogue, particularly necessary in today's world.

The significant number of bilateral meetings these last ten months bears witness to this will. In particular, I had the pleasure of receiving the Prime Minister of Israel, Mr Olmert, in Paris. Bernard Kouchner has visited Israel twice and will be there again in a few days' time.

2008 marks the 60th anniversary of the creation of the State of Israel. We should underscore the importance of this event. The circumstances surrounding the creation of the State of Israel and the particularity of this country, from as much a historical, as a geographical and political point of view, should not be forgotten. 2008 will therefore be a special year for our bilateral relationship. First of all, it was my wish that the first state visit to France after taking office as President of the Republic should be reserved for the President of the State of Israel, Mr Shimon Peres. He will be with us from the 10th to the 14th of March and I am particularly pleased that this should be the first state visit. This visit will illustrate the strength of the friendship that binds our two peoples. It will take its place as one of the historic moments of the bilateral relationship. And I will visit Israel this May, when I will give a speech at the Knesset, and Israel will be the guest of honour at the next book fair in Paris, which is always a major cultural event in our country. I would also like to tell you, having gone this far, that France wishes with all its heart for Israel to join the union of French-speaking countries. Likewise, in connection with our bilateral relationship, I am attentive to Israel's will to develop its links with the European Union. Israel can count on my support to spur, under the – well-timed – upcoming French Presidency, new momentum in its relationship with the European Union.

Now naturally, the subject of most concern to the Israelis and the friends of Israel gathered here this evening is ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. France is set on fully supporting Israel on its road to fair and lasting peace in the region. I know what the prevailing state of mind is in Israel today. The vast majority of the Israeli people feel this conflict has gone on far too long. It's time for the two parties to turn the page. Israelis and Palestinians must reach a historic compromise that will enable each party to look to the future. I believe that public opinion in its wisdom is ready for this. In Israel's own interest, for its security and its sustainability, I share Shimon Peres and Ehud Olmert's conviction that a peace agreement must enable the creation, by the end of 2008, of a viable and modern Palestinian State existing alongside Israel within secure and recognised borders.

After years of distrust, Annapolis has brought new hope. Dialogue has been resumed. It is a historic turning point that can be attributed to the courage of President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. It can also be attributed to President Bush, who chose to resolutely re-engage the United States in the peace process. Not before time. The Paris Conference in December took up this hope. The unprecedented aid mobilised by this conference is a concrete sign of the international community's confidence in the solution of two States.

It is vital to make this hope come true. It is vital to create a wave of confidence that will spur popular support for the process underway. To achieve this, concrete advances are expected on the ground. Security is obviously one of the keys to the peace process. The recent attack in Dimona has regrettably reminded us of the constant and unacceptable terrorist threat weighing on the Israeli people. The rocket strikes, for which there is no possible justification, must cease. The Franco-Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit must be released. Rest assured that I will do my utmost in this regard. The Palestinian Authority must continue with its reform of the security services and counter-terrorism action. France will never compromise on Israel's security. Yet experience has shown, and by the way, I would like to say that there is no contradiction in having a dialogue with the Arab countries and being a friend of Israel. The Arab countries have perfectly understood that anyone who wants to have any sway with Israel has to be friends with Israel, because if you are not friends with Israel, you have no sway with Israel and you are therefore not a factor for peace. So it is utterly absurd to present the two things as being contradictory. It makes no sense, as shown by the immobilism through these recent years. There can be no military solution to the conflict with the Palestinians and it is a friend of Israel who says this. What is needed is to foster a political solution, a negotiated solution.

The Israeli leaders must agree to implement on the ground the confidence measures needed to support Mahmoud Abbas and encourage the Palestinians to back the process underway: lift the roadblocks, reopen the Gaza crossing points to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid, release a maximum of prisoners, reopen the Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem. The Palestinians must be able to use and develop their land. I say this because I think it and I can do without those friendship speeches that never say what they think. I say it, continued settlement construction, which challenges the viability of the future Palestinian State and reinforces the sense of injustice, is

an obstacle to peace. And I say it all the more for having proposed a new concept in the shape of two Nation States rather than simply two States, which would solve the problem of the refugees, Mr President, because I know full well there are two ways to destroy Israel, one from the outside and one from the inside. But that's easy to say here, it also hinges on an end, I say it as I see it, to settlement construction.

An agreement by the end of the year is perfectly possible. And I see no reason why it would be any easier in ten, twenty or fifty years' time. There has already been enough suffering and now is the time to find an agreement, and I will moreover say this to the Palestinian Authority in May and I will say it to the Knesset. A friend is someone who tells you what he thinks. The best chance for security and sustainability for Israel is to have, across its borders, a democratic State, a viable State, a modern State, rather than a group of terrorists who take certain territories hostage and a population who has already suffered way too much. So the Israeli and Palestinian leaders must take the road mapped out in Annapolis, they must refuse to fall into the traps set by the radicals of both camps. France will not interfere in the negotiations underway, but France will provide all the support needed to encourage all the parties to move forward, since this is an exceptional opportunity. And France will stand by the Israeli people and by the Palestinians to help them build a future of reconciliation together.

I want to emphasise this point here. France will always stand by Israel because Israel's existence is a major political decision of the 20th century. And this existence is non-negotiable. And as regards Israel's concerns about Hamas' contentions and about the Iranian President's preposterous assertions: Israel is justified when it is shocked by words we no longer wish to hear in the 21st century. France condemns these attitudes. And for myself, I will not meet and will not shake the hand of anyone who refuses to recognise the existence of Israel.

Regarding Iran, France's policy is simple and, I feel, easily understood by all:

1. Proliferation is a serious threat to international security; we cannot stand by while Iran develops such technologies in breach of international law;
1. It is up to Iran to provide evidence of its intentions and to respect the United Nations resolutions. What purpose does uranium enrichment serve in Iran, a country that has no civilian use for it?
1. We propose a course to Iran, and it is in this country's interest. This course is to renounce military nuclear capacity, and I say this also because I think it. It would be a serious mistake to consider that civil nuclear power is reserved for the West and to say to all the Arab countries of the world: the energy of the future isn't for you, it's for us.

May all those who do not want a clash of civilisations between East and West remember that. Wanting to keep the energy of the future to ourselves is tantamount to condemning a certain number of countries to poverty and destitution. And it is in these countries racked by poverty and destitution that terrorism and fanaticism flourish. All the peoples who want to develop it in peace have a right to the energy of the future. It is a serious mistake to postulate that you have to be Western to have the right to the energy of the future.

In any case, I will not associate with those who, irresponsibly, make preparations for a clash of civilisations. Think about it. I know exactly what I'm doing, what I want to do to break these countries out of underdevelopment, because underdevelopment means poverty and poverty means that hatred grows. You know, when I offer it to Algeria, that I don't want us to find ourselves one day with a Taliban government in Algeria. When I offer its development to North Africa, it's because I don't want the same causes to produce the same effects. I say it for Iran: let Iran renounce the nuclear weapon, let Iran accept the controls, let Iran keep its word and then Iran will have the right, like all the other countries, to the energy of the future. Believe me, as a great people and a great civilisation, they are perfectly capable of hearing this message. It is a great misfortune for them to have a President who leads them into an impasse. I will not confuse a people with the elite of a moment who take, once again, unacceptable stances.

So from the moment that Iran isn't listening because their leaders aren't listening, we have no other choice than to further isolate their leaders: this means new Security Council and European Union sanctions and, indeed Mr President, the necessary restraint by businesses in economic and financial relations with this country. We have said this with the Prime Minister and the Minister for the Economy and Finance. I have said it to the businesses of France, and may all the European countries do what France has done. I don't want any doublespeak. There are sanctions against Iran. And I do not accept, even for economic reasons that I can understand, that our firms should do business with a country we are obliged to keep at arms' length from the international community.

It's quite straightforward, Mr President, the companies that do so will be in breach of the rules set down by the government of the French Republic. No doublespeak, no double standards, just one.

You spoke about the Durban conference. I'll tell you: the 2001 Durban Conference gave rise to unacceptable outbursts by certain States and numerous non-governmental organisations, which turned this conference into a platform against the State of Israel. No one has forgotten this. A follow-up conference is planned for 2009. Mr President, you asked me a question. I'll be very frank with you. France will not accept a repeat of the digressions and extremes of 2001. Our European partners share France's concerns. France will be holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the last months leading up to the follow-up conference. I tell you, we will withdraw from the process if our legitimate demands are not taken into account. I believe my answer is clear.

Thank you, Mr President, for mentioning, in your fine speech, the plan I am developing for a Union

for the Mediterranean. I would like to say to you, with the simplicity characteristic of the way friends are wont to talk to each other, that I have as great a belief in and hopes for this project as Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman had for their project of a Europe of coal and steel as a first step to a political union of the European countries.

For France and Europe, the circle formed by the Mediterranean rim countries is a place of immense wealth and immense danger. The Mediterranean could become an ever-deepening ditch that definitively relegates Africa to the fringes of development and democracy. Yet it could also become a bridge of peace and prosperity between the peoples of the two shores. My belief is that we have the power to choose and that there is no point or *raison d'être* to politics if they cannot stand up and make the choice of the Mediterranean dream.

This is why, with the Spanish Prime Minister and the Italian Prime Minister in Rome on 20 December last, I launched a call for the creation of a Union for the Mediterranean. Bringing all the Mediterranean rim countries together on an equal footing, naturally including Israel, which I think can hardly be argued to not be a Mediterranean country. The purpose of this Union will be to create tangible solidarity between its members by implementing concrete projects. There are obviously a number of obstacles to this, starting with scepticism, a lack of boldness, a lack of ambition and even disenchantment, a loss of faith in politics. But you know the adage, it is not because things are difficult that we do not dare, it is because we do not dare that things are difficult. I'm applying this to the Union for the Mediterranean, but it could be said of so many things.

Since 2002, thank you for pointing that out, we have done a great deal to combat and curb the rise in anti-Semitic acts committed on our soil. During this time, I have heard much said on the subject in this room. Forgive me for saying it, my friend Roger Cukierman won't take offence, we did some preliminary work first of all: which was to bring the CRIF statistics into line with the Ministry of the Interior statistics. I commend Michèle Alliot-Marie's action. I would like to say something: when I became Minister of the Interior, I thought, 'That's strange, my departments and CRIF's departments don't agree.' There was a problem of honesty, of transparency. It serves no purpose to artificially underestimate a tragedy or a problem. Now this disagreement doesn't exist anymore. It has been resolved. I do indeed consider that, when a synagogue is set on fire, it is not merely a public building that has been burnt, it is not merely a discourtesy. It is more serious than that, it is an act of racism, of anti-Semitism.

I remember stirring up a great hullabaloo when I said that our country had underestimated the existence of anti-Semitism for too long. I said it because I thought it was true. I wasn't pointing a finger, but simply stating a reality. I must say I've always been fascinated by this tendency we have to explain anti-Semitism. There's extreme rightwing anti-Semitism, then there's anti-Semitism from certain leftwing quarters, and then there's middle-class anti-Semitism, and then anti-Semitism associated with Zionism. But, at the end of the day, what are we talking about? We're talking about madness. We're talking about stupidity. We're talking about hatred. I've always thought that so many debates to explain the different paths that lead to anti-Semitism would come to a conclusion one day, that we would see that some paths are less serious than others, and that explaining that was somehow to trivialise it.

We have stepped up the actions. We have freed up millions of euros to guarantee the security, with the Unified Jewish Social Fund, of a certain number of places particularly at risk, especially schools and synagogues. The government has just renewed the annual agreement that associates it with the community's solidarity fund. Here, by the way, is an action wherein a great deal of obstinate opposition had to be overcome, not all of which had nothing to do with a narrow conception of secularism. The argument ran that it was totally justified for a local or regional government authority to contribute to the security of a sports club and totally unjustified to contribute to the security of a place of worship. Quite honestly, I fail to see why.

We have obtained results. Acts of anti-Semitism have decreased in our country. Our international image has significantly improved. Yet I confess that my greatest regret remains the fact that I was unable to prevent, when I was Minister of the Interior, the brutal murder of Ilan Halimi. We found him, but it was too late. I assure you that, for me, this remains a deep regret and sorrow. I don't know whether we could have saved his life before. But what happened must not be forgotten. I would add that the struggle against anti-Semitism – I'm sorry to say – is not the business of the Jewish community of France. The struggle against anti-Semitism is the business of the Republic as a whole.

Every time a Jew is struck or insulted, it is not the community that should feel insulted or struck, it is the flag of the Republic that is stained. Every time a Jew of France dies, it is not the Jewish community of France's problem, it is the problem of the entire national community.

The memory of the Holocaust plays a capital role. I know you are mindful of this.

The State will contribute to the funding of the operating budget for the Camp des Milles memorial, Mr President, I have promised you. You raised, in your speech, the 65th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto, which will be celebrated this year. Like most of you, I have been to Warsaw and, with a lump in my throat, I walked through the old ghetto neighbourhood, walked the length of the few sections of wall that remain, visited the old cemetery and at the monument to the Ghetto Uprising, on the edge of that windswept esplanade, I saw the figure of Willy Brandt kneeling in a remarkable gesture of humility, restraint, respect and repentance. Currently being built opposite this monument, as you have mentioned, is a museum of the history of Polish Jews. It will bear witness to the thousand years of Jewish history and culture in Poland and the extreme rapidity with which hatred can plunge an entire population into horror. France supports this project which is so important for the memory of Europe, and will contribute its assistance to it.

Yet France should first and foremost concentrate all its attention and energy on the memory and the passing on of the memory of the Holocaust to the younger generations. We owe this to the victims. It is more importantly our strongest weapon against racism and anti-Semitism, and our only protection against a repeat of the events and the awakening of the foul beast.

Yet this education should be given early enough to also touch hearts. It is in the early years of the dawning of awareness that children should be brought up in a total rejection of racism. At the same time, I know it's hardly easy to teach primary school children about the complexity of the Second World War and the final solution. So I have asked the government, in particular the Minister for Education, Xavier Darcos, to see to it that, every year, starting at the outset of the 2008 school year, every ten-year-old schoolchild is entrusted with the memory of one of the 11,000 French child victims of the Holocaust. Nothing is more personal than a person's name. Nothing is more moving for a child than the life story of another child of their own age, who played the same games, had the same joys and the same hopes as them, but who, in the early 1940s, had the misfortune to answer to the definition of Jew.

In Paris, at the memorial to the deportation, each child will see the name of the child whose memory has been entrusted to them. And not one of our children will be able to forget that, aside from this inscription, only in their hands does a fragment of the memory of this child live on.

You asked me, Mr President, not to back down on Guy Moquet. You see, I propose and I stick to it. I hope, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends, that you have understood that my presence here, as Head of State, was important as I had things to say to you.

Thank you.