



**Address by
the President of Iceland,
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
The Imagine Forum
Höfði Reykjavík Peace Centre's Annual Conference**

**Veröld – The House of Vigdís
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Excellencies,
dear guests.

I am honoured and pleased to be given the opportunity to deliver opening remarks at this forum, The Imagine Forum, organized by the Höfði Reykjavík Peace Centre in cooperation with the Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs, The Institute for Sustainability Studies and GEST, the Gender Equality Studies & Training Programme under the auspices of UNESCO, hosted at the University of Iceland.

I offer a special welcome to our distinguished guests abroad, Helen Clark, Fawzia Koofi, Sanam Nagaragi-Anerlini, Gulalai Ismail and Juan Pablo Villalobos. It is a pleasure to have you here with us today, even if we are not physically in the same room. In this sense, technology has made our world smaller and brought us closer together. Although these keynote addresses will be delivered from a distance, I can assure you that they will all be able to contribute greatly to important discussions here at Veröld – discussions on the international community and Afghanistan, on global citizenship education for peace and on the impact of climate change on peace.

A common thread here is the importance of building trust. Peace and trust go hand in hand. In Afghanistan, many people put their trust in the international community to provide peace. They decided to take part in state-building efforts. With the take-over of the Taliban, those efforts came to an end. Chaos and danger ensued. Here in Iceland, the authorities rightly recognized the need to help those who had worked with us in Afghanistan, those who had trusted us. I

am sure you all remember the scenes from the international airport in Kabul. I know that it took individual courage to render people vital help there and then, to rescue people who had put their trust in us, to get them from danger to safe shelter. Some of them have made it safely to Iceland. But the story does not end there. Now it is up to us to welcome them and provide decent support over here. And many more still need help to reach safety. After this devastating turn of events in Afghanistan, the international community needs to look closely into how to improve our efforts for peace-building. How to rebuild trust.

It's a strong word, trust. How do we demonstrate trust? For centuries, the handshake has been a symbol of trust in our culture. Apparently, we cannot ascertain where and when it originated but we know that it is meant to signify that we trust each other: I shake hands with you because I come to you in peace. I come to you with no malice, I do not hold a dagger up my sleeve. The recent pandemic forced us to give up handshakes for a while but hopefully, we can soon return to this old habit, this way of demonstrating trust.

Throughout the ages, people have thought about trust, written about trust. Later today, there will be a session on literature as a force for change, as a means to increase empathy between different individuals, and promote critical thinking. Allow me to mention the Icelandic sagas in this connection. They describe events and people during the first centuries of settlement on this island, more than a thousand years ago. These masterful tales are among Iceland's main contribution to our common global culture. They contain stories of voyages and battles, of love and loss, of family feuds and various other disputes. Along with other texts composed around the same time, the sagas have inspired writers like Tolkien, George Martin and J.K. Rowling, even the Avengers movies that are so popular around the globe.

In the Icelandic sagas, trust often plays a prominent role – trust, valour and honour. Indeed, these characteristics are valued more than most other traits. However, in these tales the defence of honour often leads to conflict and bloodshed so if we are to use them as guidelines for proper behaviour in a free and democratic society, we have to pick and choose – uphold the principles of trust and truth but abhor admiration of violence and viciousness.

At this same conference two years ago, I quoted a well-known mockery of battle and bloodshed in the sagas, and am tempted to do so again. In the middle of last century, Halldór Laxness, our Nobel laureate in literature, composed a work called *Happy Warriors* in English, a parody of the reverence for feuds and fighting which can be found in the Icelandic sagas. The blood brothers Þorgeir and Þormóður are central in the story and one cold evening, Þormóður asks his partner why he is still awake. “I can get no sleep”, Þorgeir replies, “for wondering where the men may be who are worthy that I should kill them.” And throughout his life of incessant assassinations and blind butchery, Þorgeir is

mindful of his mother's words in youth, that "Never should a true fighting-man bring on himself the shame of having chosen peace, when there was strife to be had."

Well, the world has had enough of happy warriors. Let them only exist in our fiction, let them thrive there if we wish. Similarly, in recent decades Icelandic writers have made it big on the international scene by writing crime novels that take place in this country. At the same time, Iceland has topped the Global Peace Index as the most peaceful country on earth. It might look like a paradox but does this mean that we are better than others at securing peace? Of course not. For one, we are blessed by geography, an island in the middle of a vast ocean. Or does it mean that we can tell others how to secure peace? Again, of course not, but I believe that the people of Iceland want to support positive change in the world. This conference is at least a testimony of that will.

Finally, in the last session today, the focus will be on the impact of climate change on peace. Globally, we know of this threat, its effects on civil strife and movements of people in search for a better life. Locally in Iceland, we have seen recently how extremities in weather conditions pose risks for people who assumed that their homes were not in danger. While we should always be careful to draw wide-ranging conclusions from single events, such developments should make us on this island yet more aware of the risks to peace posed by climate change around the world.

Again, dear guests from abroad, I welcome you to Iceland, and I wish all of you a fruitful meeting of minds here in Veröld – the house of Vigdís.