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**Remarks at the Athens Democracy Forum on the International Day of Democracy
Athens, 15 September 2015**

Your Highness,

Mayor Kaminis,

Stephen Dunbar-Johnson,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege to be here for the third year and to have been part of the evolution of the Athens Democracy Forum since its inception.

Let me thank you, Mr. Mayor, for your steadfast support. Let me also pay tribute to Greece so that fortitude you are showing in facing even larger challenges than when we met last year.

In your programmes, you have a message of support from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. In it, he notes that that gatherings like the Athens Democracy Forum provide the much needed oxygen of dialogue. Oxygen that is badly needed as we keep pushing the boulder of democracy up the hill.

The work of supporting democracy has surely never felt more like the labour of Sisyphus than this year.

The challenge with all International Days is finding something to commit to beyond words. So here are a few thoughts.

I came to Athens straight from Turkey, where I visited a project of the UN Democracy Fund working with a group of Syrian women refugees near the Syria border.

These women fled to the Turkish side and have settled there. Many of them worked in Syria as lawyers and engineers, pharmacists and managers. Many of them now clean hotel rooms during the morning and work on our project for the rest of the day. A project that gives them opportunities to organize, engage and support other refugees while preparing for the future, whether in Turkey, Syria or elsewhere. A project that invites them to design and run their own initiatives. These range from a women's committee to coordinate information and services for Syrian refugee women, to a vocational training centre for young girls so as to prevent child marriages -- a growing problem among Syrians in Turkey struggling to provide for their families. And many other initiatives.

We hope to bring all these women's initiatives into one house where they could cross-pollinate. A house which could serve as a model for Syrian refugee communities elsewhere.

Because it is courage like theirs that transforms a refugee from a statistic to a human being living in dignity. Today, I am dedicating my remarks to them.

Like Lama, who worked as an attorney in Syria, where her husband disappeared in the war. She now hopes to start a legal advisory service to review and validate legal and identity documents for Syrians in Turkey.

The Syrian community needs thousands more Lamas, and we need to do all we can to support them.

I also visited Tunisia, the only hope of the Arab Spring, which is being racked by terrorism, a stagnant economy, and massive unemployment among university-educated young people. The latter issue is feeding frustration and extremism -- and contributing to Tunisia's export of jihadists which is more than that of any country in the world.

In Tunis I met with Nabil who has just left his job with a major international development bank overseas to return home and start an economic empowerment initiative in the rural south and the interior. His group will launch innovative projects in agriculture and small manufacturing, specifically geared towards jobless young

people with diplomas. And it is also designed to serve as a prototype for other countries in the region.

Tunisia needs many more Nabils, and we need to do all we can to support them.

Finally, I was in Algeria, which has managed to build relative stability after the Black Decade of civil war and Islamic insurgency of the 1990s. This is thanks to a policy of amnesty and national reconciliation, combined with a programme with the nation's *imams* to counter extremism, and wide distribution of the nation's oil wealth including grants to young entrepreneurs. Now the plummeting oil prices could threaten to bring more volatility and a resurgence of extremism to Algeria. Before that happens, their experience needs to be shared more widely, including through lessons learned across the region and beyond.

What these examples tell us, ladies and gentlemen, is that in the midst of all the crises and fear, the world also has an opportunity. That opportunity is called civil society – the lifeblood of democracy. The world needs to invest massively in civil society organizations - the wide and vibrant array of voluntary groupings that are neither the State or the market. The groups driven by passion rather than self-interest. The groups that have the reach and the drive to work to integrate and empower refugees, both in frontline states and in Europe. The groups who have the creativity and vision to motivate young people in their home communities and give them a sense of purpose.

This support for civil society is the whole mission of the UN Democracy Fund. But such support also needs to be scaled up more widely by Governments everywhere who have the means to do so – and by the private sector. On this International Day of Democracy, this is my appeal. It is one thing the world can do. I think it has a duty to seize that opportunity. Thank you very much.