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Patrick Corrigan, Amnesty International, December 9 2022, Ulster Museum

Thank you for inviting me to help mark the transfer of these wonderful arpilleras, quilts and wall hangings from the Conflict Textiles collection to the Ulster Museum. In particular, thank you to Roberta Bacic and Karen Logan for the invitation to speak here as we mark Human Rights Day.

I want to speak about the human rights struggles whose stories are told through this collection of textiles and the threads which link them and link people here with people in Chile, Nigeria, Peru, Catalonia, Colombia, Gaza and the other people and places whose lives and campaigns for justice are told through this work.

Antonia Amador, the creator of the textile, 'On the "Good" Side of the Fence', about the movement of people from Africa to Europe in search of refuge, a better life, only to – all too often – encounter detention centres and even death - has written:

"What a shame that in the 21st century, human rights are not respected.... We all have the right to a dignified life, no matter where you come from."

That's what Amnesty International believes too, and it's what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights tell us that every country in the world has signed up to as well.

But too often, that promise is betrayed not kept.

Injustice and people's struggle for justice is a universal story. And we can see that story told in the fabrics and threads of these textiles.

It is both welcome and fitting that Conflict Textiles has now made this donation of some of their collection to the Ulster Museum, a place where we come to try to better understand this place and the world we live in.

Let's start with our own place, our own recent conflict and the struggle for truth and justice still being waged today.

The 'Peace Quilt' by Irene McWilliams commemorates the more than 3,000 people whose lives were lost – though perhaps it might be better to say their lives were taken, stolen – during the 'Troubles' with each piece of red cloth marking a lost life, and a family scarred by that loss.

It makes me think of Colin Davidson's Silent Testimony exhibition, which I have been moved to see a number of times here in the museum, which tells the story of 18 people who are connected by loss through our decades of conflict – loss of eyesight, loss of partners and family.

Of course, we know that in most of those 3,000-plus cases, no-one has ever been held to account for breaching that most fundamental of human rights, the right to life.

And if the UK government's Troubles Legacy Bill passes, every one of those families will have the right to justice denied to them forever. I note that the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights – the guardian of the European Convention on Human Rights – has today called for the UK government to withdraw the Bill. Amnesty shares that view.

The textile from Chile entitled 'No to Impunity', depicts the struggle for truth and justice, and against General Augusto Pinochet's Amnesty Law, which gave amnesty to the perpetrators of human rights violations carried out during and after his coup in the 1970s. It put the rights of perpetrators above victims.

The parallels with here and now are unavoidable. Indeed, our colleagues in CAJ, the Committee on the Administration of Justice, have assessed that the UK Government's Legacy Bill would create an amnesty more sweeping than that of General Pinochet's. Quite something to reflect on as we mark Human Rights Day 2022.

There are a number of wonderful works from Chile, reflecting on the impact on people's lives of the 1973 coup d'état.

In the 'Stitching the Search' quilt from Chile, Nicole Drouilly shares memories from the life of her older sister Jacqueline and her husband, Marcelo, who were abducted from their home in Santiago by Pinochet's security police, becoming two of the countless so-called disappeared.

Nicole's persistence in seeking justice for Jacqueline reminds me of Lisa Dorrian's sister Joanne, who just this week was again calling for help to find her sister's remains - and the other families of The Disappeared here whose campaigns to locate the remains of their loved ones go on.

The wall hanging, 'Where Are They?', also by Irene McWilliams, is pretty raw depiction of families, here and around the world, and their anguish in being denied the right to be reunited with their loved ones, all victims of enforced disappearance. Scraps of cloth and scraps of hope...

Last month's search of Bragan Bog in Co Monaghan by The Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains for the body of Columba McVeigh who was abducted, murdered and secretly buried by the IRA in 1975 is a reminder that four families – those of Joe Lynskey, Robert Nairac, Seamus Maguire and Columba McVeig - are still waiting.

There is also a common thread running through many of these textiles which tells the story of struggle, so not just of victimhood, but of survivors of or witnesses to human rights violations taking a stand – together – for justice.

It calls to mind the much cited and much needed inspiration of anthropologist Margaret Mead when she said: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

Through these textiles, people who have been through so much, use their needle and thread and fabric to cry out for justice. Like the 15 women forced to flee a massacre in Colombia in 2000 who found solidarity together and by recalling struggles from earlier times in their depiction of a ‘Cimarrón / Runaway Slave’, who, like them, fled injustice.

We can make a link between that and an item in the Inclusive Global Histories exhibition upstairs - a bronze manilla or bracelet from West Africa, which was used as currency in the slave trade, which brought many of their ancestors from Africa to Colombia centuries before. It should prompt us to think of people from this part of the world, our forebears, and their role and this city’s role in the transatlantic slave trade.

The Africa quilt, which has been donated as part of this collection, tells the story of the exploitation of Africa for the benefit of wealthy nations elsewhere, an exploitation of that continent’s natural resources which continues to this day.

The Africa quilt originated in Nigeria, from where we can also find an item currently on display in the Inclusive Global Histories exhibition – a spear from Benin in Nigeria, looted as part of the devastating British imperial attack on that country in the 19th century and shipped to Belfast where it has been since. Such items point to our own ancestors’ complicity in human rights violations around the world and should call us to reflect on how we might make reparations for the harm done, a harm that has rippled down the generations with lasting impact.

With these wonderful conflict textiles now in Ulster Museum collection, we are better equipped to draw the links between then and now, between here and there.

The key to human rights progress is to learn from past abuses, to ensure there is accountability for such violations and to commit never again to repeat such crimes. It was in that spirit that Eleanor Roosevelt and her colleagues proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the United Nations on December 10 1948. In the wake of the atrocities of the Second World War – the second in a generation – they said ‘never again’ and urged the nations of the world to commit to respecting the fundamental human rights proclaimed in its thirty paragraphs.

The textiles, ‘Never Again’, reflecting on the horrors of the Holocaust, and ‘No Going Back’, a demand for no return to the horrors of our own local conflict, share a call, an exhortation, that we learn from our past, that we share our stories of what is lost when human rights are not protected, and that we come together to take a stand for justice and better days ahead.

It is with that sense of determination, shared mission and hope that we come together here today to celebrate the work of these textile artists and to restate the universality of human rights and to commit ourselves to making the dream of the Universal Declaration a lived reality for all. Thank you.