**Acceptance speech**

 " Lawyers for lawyers"

Distinguished members of Lawyers for Lawyers,

Ladies and gentlemen

Thank you very much for giving me this memorable opportunity to say a few humble words before this distinguished audience. It is with profound gratitude and humility that I accept this award and present myself before you all today. Having been chosen for this prestigious recognition, I am humbled and honored, not only for myself, but also for all those who fight daily for human dignity and the rule of law in Angola and around the world.

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Lawyers for Lawyers for their continued dedication to the cause of human rights defenders and for their tireless work to protect those who face injustice, often in the face of immense adversity. Their existence is not a mere coincidence, but a beacon of hope for those, like me, who believe that true justice should have no borders, not even borders imposed by oppression or fear. In a world where injustices seem to have become entrenched as part of normality, initiatives like this remind us that there are still many bridges to build, and many freedoms to conquer.

Secondly, to all those who have made this event possible: to those who have nominated the candidates, to the patience and commitment of those who have worked in the difficult selection process, to those who, with their participation, have contributed to the organization, to the jury, and to all the entities, organizations, and individuals who have dedicated their precious time to be here today.

This award is not only a reflection of my personal journey, but also of a collective of activists, human rights defenders, journalists, trade unionists, and many ordinary citizens who every day face the challenges of a system that sometimes prefers to silence the truth rather than promote it. It is also a tribute to all those who, in the name of human dignity, challenge established norms and the impositions of a regime that prefers manipulation and control to transparency and justice.

Let me now introduce myself and share a little about the reality of the country I come from: Angola. My name is Zola Ferreira Bambi. I have been a lawyer for over 20 years, and throughout my career, I have had the privilege, and sometimes the difficult responsibility, of acting in defense of human rights, assisting victims of abuses of power, systematic injustices, and those who, silently and courageously, fight for freedom. I have provided legal assistance at all levels to activists, human rights defenders, journalists, trade unionists, communities and ethnic minorities, as well as citizens who are victims of abuse by the police or other public servants. I am also president of the Observatory for Social Cohesion and Justice, an independent, non-political, non-profit NGO, and I was recently appointed to the Human Rights Commission of the Angolan Bar Association.

Angola is located in southern Africa, with an area of 1,246,700 km² and a population of approximately 30 million. The official language is Portuguese. The country gained its independence in 1975. Its independence was quickly followed by internal struggle between the movements that had fought for freedom, with the MPLA seeking to seize power in violation of the transitional agreements for a democratic system. This generated a devastating civil war that lasted 27 years and, despite ending in 2002, left visible scars on our society and an authoritarian regime that endured for decades. After the end of the war, the country embarked on a process of political openness, but unfortunately, the democratic system remains fragile, with institutionalized corruption and constantly restricted freedom of expression.

During the years of the civil war, the MPLA forcibly established a single-party system with a Marxist orientation, characterized by a cult of personality and the dictates of party dogma. There was no room for diversity or for elections. In Angola, elections are rigged, and the judiciary, although formally independent, is heavily influenced by the interests of political power. Our justice system, on many occasions, is not exempt and, instead of serving to protect the fundamental rights of citizens, has become a tool in the hands of a regime seeking to perpetuate its power.

The country lived under a provisional constitutional project, without a true Magna Carta, for more than 27 years. Until 2010, Angola did not have a Constitution of the Republic. Although the 2010 Constitution guarantees rights such as freedom of expression, demonstration, assembly, and the press, these rights are frequently violated. When we try to exercise them, we face pressure, intimidation, persecution, threats, arbitrary arrests, illegal detentions, land grabbing, forced displacement, and even summary executions.

The independent press, which should be a pillar of checks and balances, also suffers persecution, threats, and attacks simply for carrying out its role of informing the population and questioning government actions. Journalists, as defenders of human rights and voices of society, are subject to repression, imprisonment, and in some cases, even death. This is the harsh reality we face in Angola, a reality that imposes on us, every day, the duty to resist, to remain steadfast in our struggle.

Judicial independence and neutrality are nonexistent. The justice system is under the control of the ruling party and the President of the Republic, who has unlimited powers, similar to those of an emperor. Public institutions are partisan, and there is a clear aversion to democratic values. The country resembles more a police state than a state governed by the rule of law.

Although courts exist, they do not operate impartially or with the necessary independence. Sensitive cases are referred to magistrates subject to the regime. Sentences are handed down and evidence fabricated against activists, human rights defenders, journalists, and community leaders. Recently, the magistrates' association publicly denounced pressures that force them to act with bias, reporting persecution, surveillance, and even deaths. Lawyers, as servants of justice, also face marginalization and threats. Many are monitored, assaulted, or even arrested on the spot, violating their immunities and constitutional guarantees.

This is the environment in which we defend human rights.

Every case we bring to court is met with reactions that say, "It's like complaining to a pig about a boar, because they're all the same." However, even in the face of these adversities, we continue to fight for change. The Angolan regime seeks to create a culture of fear, and violence has become routine to destabilize consciences and freedoms. That's why we cannot remain indifferent to injustice. We must act and react.

Recently, Angola's Minister of Justice and Human Rights gave a speech in Geneva, in which he stated that "no one is punished or detained for protesting," contrary to the reality we experience in Angola. An example of this occurred in March, when several international organizations were denied entry into the country, despite complying with regulations, simply because they were participating in a democracy-related event.

In April, the Ethics and Journalists' Portfolio Commission was robbed, where documents and equipment were stolen. On April 26, 2025, several activists and journalists were arrested and brought before the courts in an attempt to peacefully demonstrate. This is the daily reality for those seeking to exercise their rights freely and independently.

In my career, I've learned that true heroines and heroes are not just generals, politicians, or intellectuals, but citizens who, in their daily lives, fight for respect for their fundamental rights, confronting the system without means, without expectations of victory, but with the hope of triumphing through persistence.

Finally, I reiterate my acceptance of this prestigious award with profound gratitude to all those who have found my humble efforts worthy of recognition. This award holds immense significance for the defense of human rights in Angola. It shows us that, even when we carry out our work in complete secrecy and silence, the echo of our actions reaches where we least imagine, and solidarity reaches where we least expect it.

With this recognition, the Netherlands encourages us to continue on this path, offering a protective shield and a recognition that cannot be forgotten. But, despite all this, here I am, and here are all those who, like me, are dedicated to this cause. We will continue to resist, to persist, always moving forward even when the odds are against us. This is what makes us believe that change, however difficult, is possible. Our victories may not be immediate, but every step we take toward freedom and social justice is an achievement, and this award represents, for me, recognition not only of my work, but of all those who confront the regime, often in extremely adverse conditions.

Therefore, this award is not only a reflection of my efforts, but also a tribute to the many activists, human rights defenders, and anonymous citizens who risk their lives every day to ensure that future generations can live in a more just and free country.

When we talk about courage, we think of the bravery of great people. But in my work, I've learned that the true heroes are ordinary citizens, those who, even without means, without resources, without visibility, fight unwaveringly for what is right.

And finally, I want to say that, as a human rights defender and activist, it's not courage that inspires what I do, but a sense of duty, and a duty to help. I simply tried to overcome fear and avoid indifference. I will continue this generous battle alongside those who decided to take on this task, so that one day, we can look back and say, despite the difficulties, we made a difference.

I would like to thank Lawyers for Lawyers once again for this recognition. It not only strengthens our work, but also sends a powerful message to those who oppose freedoms and encourages human rights activists and defenders around the world: "You are not alone."

Thank you so much.

Zola Ferreira Bambi