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**Speech by Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation Sigrid Kaag on the occasion of the Prince Claus Awards Ceremony, Amsterdam, 2 December 2020.**

Your Royal Highness,

Your Excellencies,

Dear Laureates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to be back here at the Prince Claus Awards, and a genuine pleasure to address this year's laureates.

Unfortunately we cannot meet in person, but I want you to know that I saw, or read about your work, and was touched and inspired by it – as I am sure many others will be. Your efforts are needed this year, more than ever before. Because art offers a window on the world.

Now that the world itself has been closed off, art is the strongest and truest way in which we still get to experience it. Because what is art, if not a rendition of experience? Of life itself: with all its imperfections and surprises, its hardships and its ecstasies, its ugliness and its beauty. Art is a lens through which we can try to understand life, to give it meaning, and to reshape it.

At this moment, most places where you can enjoy these experiences are closed. Museums, theatres, libraries, and other cultural institutions are all under pressure. For some authoritarian governments, this sad fact is actually a convenient situation. They have long looked for ways to restrict the arts, and to limit their influence. Because the power of art, its very expression scares them. It scares them because some governments are simply afraid of change and truth. The current crisis offers them a chance to crack down even further on those who would speak truth to power. To silence debate and to stifle human progress.

This cannot be allowed.

So it is essential that you continue to challenge and to create. Because when physical freedom is restricted, we desperately rely on the journeys offered by art, literature, and music – even more than we used to. That is why the achievements of you, the laureates, are so impressive – and so necessary.

It is also why the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs supports, and will continue to support, the important work achieved by the Prince Claus Fund.

To help amplify the voices of those who have something meaningful to say, to share. The world needs the truth and beauty that art and culture provide – and the work we celebrate today is exemplary of all.

It embodies social engagement.

It speaks truth to all those who listen.

It shows us the vital importance of art.

So I would like to congratulate you, the laureates, with your extraordinary achievements, your courage and your wisdom. I wish you a wonderful celebration in today's ceremony – it is well deserved!

*Check against delivery*