**Speech on behalf of the jury, to be presented at the Peace Research conference for awarding of the Seventh Thesis Prize of the Foundation for Peace research and UPEACE Centre The Hague, 12 December 2014 at University of Groningen**

Ladies and Gentleman,

It is my great pleasure to introduce the next part of today’s programme: the Visions of Peace thesis prize. This is the seventh year that the prize is handed out, to recognize the best master’s thesis in the field of peace studies - broadly defined.

Today’s world of international politics is a ‘thick’ society, with a host of treaties, legal regimes, multilateral institutions and supranational organisations that all seek to tame anarchy and conflict. However, the continued difficulties of promoting peace and hence the relevance of reflecting on ‘Visions of Peace’ has been made clear at this conference. Last year I referred to the devastation in Syria as only the latest example of both gross injustice and the inability of states and international organisations to generate a meaningful response and secure peace. Since then the conflicts in Syria have multiplied and peace seems further away than ever. This tells us all we need to know about the challenges we face in studying and making peace.

The papers submitted for this year’s prize reveal all too clearly the destructive consequences of the continuing conflicts in Colombia, Libya, Nigeria and Palestine, as well as the long-lasting damage caused by conflicts that officially ended decades ago, in Rwanda, Indonesia, and Bosnia.

All these represent complex challenges for scholars of conflict and peace studies, not to mention policymakers, peace advocates, and school teachers who struggle to deal with the violent past in education of the next generation.

But the theses also report encouraging developments. Surely, it is a sign of hope that a growing number of student papers show the importance of deeds and words of “ordinary” people and everyday practices to build peace from the grassroots. Their message is that peace is too important to be left to governments alone.

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Before I introduce the jury of the 2014 Visions on Peace prize, I would like to welcome and thank the representatives of the organizations involved with the thesis prize:

the Foundation of Peace Studies which has been the founder of this prize 7 years ago, then together with IKV Pax Christi

UPEACE – which has joined the club last year, and has been very helpful in the administration of the prize

and last but not least ASN Bank for its financial contribution.

It is thanks to these organizations that we have a seventh edition of the Visions of Peace award.

This year, the jury for the Visions of Peace prize consisted of

*Hans de Wit* (Professor of Internationalisation of Higher Education at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences)

*Sami Faltas* (senior lecturer of International Relations at the University of Groningen) and

me, *Tanja Aalberts* (Senior Research Fellow in the Faculty of Law at the VU University in Amsterdam), as Chair of the jury.

I also wish to express the jury’s appreciation to Petra van der Ham from UPEACE for her invaluable assistance in administering the thesis prize.

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The purpose of the Visions of Peace award is to stimulate research in peace studies, a very broad area of studies encompassing many different disciplines and areas of expertise, from philosophy, politics and sociology, to law, criminology, history and anthropology.

Apart from the many different epistemologies that guide the field of peace studies, the field is also very diverse in terms of research questions explored, research methods employed and units of analysis explored - from doctrinal analysis of law; policies and institutional structures created to implement conflict‐prevention strategies; to focused, ethnographic studies of specific, conflict‐affected communities in remote locations, where people struggle to rebuild their communities.

The dynamics of conflict and the reconstruction of societies after a war, cry out for a continuation of critical and innovative peace research. The jury wishes to acknowledge that scientific knowledge, while sometimes overvalued, is also under‐appreciated in developing practical steps to bring peace and to promote justice

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**The entries**

This year, the jury received 43 theses. As ever, the topics, were extremely mixed:

from a discourse analysis of war journalism;

to classical evaluations on the power dynamics in modern‐day conflicts,

to the criminalisation of irregular migration,

and anthropological studies of peace and security at the grassroots.

In addition to the wide range of disciplines and topics, the research papers we received emanated, as in previous years, from many different faculties and institutions.

We were pleased to receive submissions from graduates of political science, law, anthropology, international relations, Human geography, international public management, development studies, philosophy, genocide studies, Human rights, criminology, conflict studies and history.

Candidates attended
Radboud University Nijmegen,
the Universities of Groningen, Amsterdam, Leiden, Utrecht and Wageningen,
Erasmus university, Rotterdam

the VU University of Amsterdam and
the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague.

The gender balance was approximately 50%

As in previous years, the jury found this range and diversity to be immensely gratifying. We conceive of multidisciplinarity as a real asset of the thesis prize, which makes it extremely interesting, and also a formidable challenge to be involved in the selection. The jury thankfully benefited from the diverse range of expertise between the three of us.

As in previous years, the predominant language of the submitted research papers was English, with this year only 1 thesis being written in Dutch.

**The process of selection and criteria applied**

As the jury is unable to read every submitted thesis in full, candidates are requested to submit a 1000 words summary highlighting the key points of their thesis. Thanks to the help of UPEACE, all of the entries were presented to the jury as anonymous papers.

As indicated on the website, the first selection was made on the basis of a careful reading of the 43 summaries. Each jury member independently made an initial shortlist of research papers that we wanted to read in full. We noticed that the quality of the summaries varied a lot.

After making our individual selections, the jury met in person to discuss the shortlists. In the end, the jury selected 8 theses for the second round of selection. As every year, this part was as interesting as it was challenging, given the variety of theses which invariably forces the jury to compare apples and oranges or even bananas.

Against the papers that we read in full, we applied a range of standard criteria, each of which was weighted, primarily, according to six categories that emphasised scientific quality and originality. In addition to this, a number of criteria addressed the relevance of the research paper to the work of organisations in the peace sector.

After the jury members had scored each paper (again, blindly from each other), it was clear that three papers emerged to the top of the list. Noteworthy: they were all written by female students.

The nominated students are – in alphabetical order:

1. **Nina Liza Bode**: *“The Imaging of Violent Gender Performances; How do violent women serve as weapons of political violence, how are they portrayed, and how does this influence their agency?”*University of Groningen, International Relations and International Organizations
2. **Johanna S. Küther**: *“The United Nations Arms Trade Treaty - Concluded by states but accomplished by civil society?"*VU University Amsterdam, Law and Politics of International Security
3. **Frances Topham Smallwood**: *“Dependent victims or empowered agents? Syrian experiences of refugeehood in Lebanon”*University of Amsterdam, International Relations

We have invited the three nominated students to present their thesis at this symposium. Unfortunately, **Frances Topham Smallwood** was unable to join us today but she has provided us with a video presentation, which we will broadcast in a moment.

We are delighted that Nina and Johanna are with us today, with your families and friends who can feel justly proud of your accomplishments. We look forward to hear more about your theses.

[PRESENTATIONS]

**After the presentations: Final Selection**

Thank you for these informative presentations. I think it goes without saying why these three theses were nominated. They all provide an original and critical analysis of peace and security in contemporary societies. All theses make an important contribution to the academic debate in their respective subject fields, and in various ways shake some of the conventional wisdoms and traditional parameters of international studies.

That being said, one of these three theses clearly stood out, on the basis of all criteria.

The jury was impressed by a number of aspects of this thesis, and particularly appreciated its analysis from a different perspective than the dominant statist viewpoint of traditional international politics. Now this is not much of a clue, as it is noteworthy that all the nominated theses this year address the agency of what traditionally are considered marginal or marginalized groups in world politics: women, NGOs and refugees. But one thesis stood out in its careful, and critical analysis of both dominant perspectives and relevant discussions. We appreciated the mature attitude in the student’s approach to the topic, and the engaging dialogue with the so-called state of the art. The author really presented herself as an autonomous and critical voice in the debate, carefully navigating the minefield of stereotypes that informs both academic and political discourse. Crucially, she did so without falling back on creating strawmen of people that approach the topic from other paradigmatic perspectives. We would only like to push her to deconstruct her own reference on p. 29 to the person with whom I share name and age as a ‘girl’…

As you may have gathered by now, I am very pleased to announce that the jury has awarded the 2014 Visions of Peace thesis award to … **Nina Liza Bode** for her thesis entitled *“The Imaging of Violent Gender Performances”*

While the other finalists were, in our view, also excellent contributions, her thesis stood out as the most innovative and exciting contribution. While at face value more academic than policy relevant, Nina’s critical reflection on violence and gender provides insights into hidden assumptions and logics that we would like policy makers and peace operators to be more reflexive about.

Before I handover the prize, on behalf of the jury I would like to congratulate all three nominated students, **Johanna S. Küther** , **Frances Topham Smallwood** and especially **Nina Liza Bode** for the excellent dissertations you have produced, and wish you all the very best in your careers.

Cordially,

**The jury:**
Tanja Aalberts (Chair)

Sami Faltas

Hans de Wit