

## **What the World Expects of Its UN in the New Century**

***(for the “UN Chronicle” Magazine, Number 3, 2000)***

On November 19th, 1998, I witnessed the UN General Assembly issue one of its greatest challenges since the Declaration on Human Rights fifty years ago.

For the first time in its history, UN ambassadors spent an entire day discussing the meaning and practice of nonviolence. Representatives from over twenty nations agreed that, if the world is to survive, nonviolence must be adopted by the nations of the world

After invoking Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the hopes of humanity, the Assembly declared the years 2001-2010 to be “A Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World.” The Secretary-General later said it was one of the most historic decisions ever made by the UN.

So what does the world expect from the United Nations at the dawn of a new century? The world expects the UN to help lead us on the road of nonviolence to a new culture of peace. I can think of four basic steps to start us on that journey.

First, if we want to build a culture of peace, we need to publicly recognize that we live in a culture of war and violence, and commit ourselves to practicing the way of nonviolence.

Today, over 35 wars are being waged; over one million Iraqis have died during the last ten years from economic sanctions; over 40,000 people die from starvation each day; over 25,000 nuclear weapons continue to be maintained; and violence, injustice, poverty, racism, sexism and environmental degradation spread like a plague among us, threatening our existence.

The world is waiting for the UN to declare the simple truth: violence doesn't work, violence doesn't solve anything, violence is a never-ending downward spiral. It's immoral, illegal, and impractical. And the only way out of this addiction to violence is the sobriety of nonviolence.

“It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence,” Martin Luther King, Jr. said the night before he was killed. “It’s nonviolence or nonexistence.”

I suggest with Dr. King that the only way toward a culture of peace is through active nonviolence.

At the heart of nonviolence is the vision of the all-inclusive beloved community, the insight that all life is sacred, that we are all equal sisters and brothers, all children of the God of peace, all equal human beings. From now on, we can never hurt or kill another human being, much less wage war, build nuclear weapons, or allow millions of human beings to starve to death each year.

Nonviolence is a way of remembering and recalling everyday of our lives, who we are and what we are about, that we are all equal, already one. Nonviolence is active love and truth that seeks justice for everyone, resists systemic evil, persistently reconciles all sides, but adamantly renounces violence as a means toward peace. As we seek truth and justice for all humanity, we insist on the bottom line of nonviolence--that there is no cause, however noble, for which we are willing to kill. Indeed, like Jesus of Nazareth and Mahatma Gandhi, we willingly accept suffering without retaliating and risk our lives if necessary in the struggle for justice, equal rights and true peace.

Nonviolence begins in our hearts, and from there, transforms nations and the world, as Gandhi demonstrated so well.

So the world is waiting for the UN to proclaim and put into practice the “Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence.” It looks to the UN to proclaim a vision of nonviolence, like Gandhi and King did, and to point the way forward.

Second, the world expects the UN to help us abolish all nuclear weapons and all weapons of mass destruction. The end of the Cold War brought an historic opportunity: the chance to dismantle our nuclear arsenals. Yet they remain today, and there is no real movement toward serious

disarmament. How can we teach our children not to kill or retaliate while we continue to threaten the destruction of our enemies and the planet itself? We cannot be for peace and silently allow these weapons to exist.

From now on, every one of us is an abolitionist. We must all speak out publicly for nuclear disarmament--for the rest of our lives.

Third, the world expects the UN to abolish war itself. This was the original goal of the UN. It needs to be on the top of our list today--even it seems like a dream. Everything we do must be aimed at ending war. That means relentlessly pursuing diplomatic solutions, negotiations, dialogue, and other nonviolent alternatives to resolve international crises. It means supporting nonviolent movements around the world.

You can't fight war crimes by committing war crimes; you can't uphold international law by violating international law. You can't stop violence by inflicting further violence. If you want to reach moral ends you have to use moral means. Killing people who kill is not the way to stop the killing or to teach that killing is wrong. War and genocide can only be stopped through active nonviolence.

Today, we need to tell the world, there is no such thing as a just war. War is never justified. War never works. Bombings never end wars or crises. While it may appear to stop the crisis in the short term, it only guarantees future wars down the road.

Dr. King put it this way: "Returning violence for violence only multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

If we sow seeds of peace and nonviolence, we will reap a harvest of peace and nonviolence. This is the way reality works. So from now on, we must "beat our swords into plowshares and study

war no more.”

Fourth, the world expects the UN to immediately lift the economic sanctions on Iraq and stop the deliberate killing of Iraqi children. Last year, I led a Fellowship of Reconciliation delegation to Iraq that featured Nobel Peace Laureates Mairead Corrigan Maguire of Belfast and Adolfo Perez Esquivel of Argentina. We saw for ourselves that the situation in Iraq is not just a humanitarian crisis, but a spiritual and moral disaster! Our trip was horrific and heartbreaking. Some 5000 to 6000 children under age five die each month from these economic sanctions. Over 500,000 Iraqi children have died since the economic sanctions were imposed ten years ago.

In one hospital, we met hundreds of dying children, with their mothers sitting by, weeping. The doctors pleaded with us, explaining that they had no medicine. “These children are innocent. What is their crime? They are not violating your air space. Let them live!”

Iraq’s infrastructure has been destroyed. Depleted uranium has poisoned this ancient land. A vicious cycle of disease and contaminated water kills the people. Yet as we learned first hand, the children of Iraq are not our enemies. The world knows how cruel these sanctions are. Please do what you can to stop these immoral, genocidal economic sanctions on Iraq immediately.

“We are constantly being astonished these days at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence,” Gandhi once said. “But I maintain that far more undreamt of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be made in the field of nonviolence.”

If the world is to survive, if humanity is to thrive, if a culture of peace is ever to blossom, we will have to dismantle every weapon of mass destruction, abolish war itself, lift the economic sanctions on Iraq, feed every starving child, and teach the world the ancient wisdom of nonviolence as not only an idealistic vision, but the only practical solution.

If we embark on that long but beautiful road of nonviolence, if we disarm our hearts and our

nations, then a culture of peace will surely become a reality and the UN will live up to the world's expectations.

The challenges have never been so great, but neither have the possibilities. What better time to make real a decade--a century!--of nonviolence?

The world is counting on us.

\* \* \* \* \*