

Agenda Item 33: Culture of Peace

Statement by Hon'ble Dr. (Mrs.) J.G. Mohanta, MP on November 2, 2000

Mr. President,

The eight areas of action identified by the General Assembly to promote the culture of peace, which the Secretary General recalls in his report, span so much of the work of the United Nations system that this one agenda item helps us check on the progress that we as member States, and the United Nations as an institution, are making towards the promotion of our common objectives.

The first of these eight areas was a culture of peace through education. The Secretary General has reported on the steps taken throughout the world to put this in practice. We need to take note of the dangerous exceptions. The unending strife in Afghanistan, the most protracted and vicious of the conflicts now bedevilling the world, is sustained by young men who as children were educated only in war, and into a culture of intolerance, bigotry and hatred. Volumes have been written about the schools which exploit poverty to draw children into their fold with the temptation of two square meals a day, and train them to become cannon fodder in one war or the other, falsely fomented and sustained in the name of religion. Their poison, first injected into Afghanistan, has now spread from it. We and other neighbours of Afghanistan have borne the brunt; others are now becoming targets.

Sustainable economic and social development was the second area of action. As a first step, we hope the commitments of the Millennium Declaration will be implemented, as those agreed to at the various world conferences over the last decade were not. In many regions, economic development has slowed down, or is not keeping pace with need. Globalisation has put pressure on social development. Experience shows that both unequal benefits from growth and the absence of growth produce tensions that can lead on to conflict, within nations and between them. A culture of peace cannot truly take hold as long as there is unequal or flagging economic and social development.

Respect for all human rights was the third area of action. Here too, progress has been uneven. The promotion of a narrow and selective interpretation of human rights has become a political tool of the powerful. Whether this promotes human rights, or whether this is indeed the intention, is a moot point. What is obvious is that human rights have become an arena of conflict between nations; it would be simplistic to suggest that the friction is only between countries that promote human rights and those that violate them. The tension is between those that preach about human rights, and those who resent self-serving advice. To promote a culture of peace, we must collectively, and without any assumptions of cultural or moral superiority, work to promote the human rights of all, without drawing arbitrary distinctions between one set of rights and the other; economic, social and cultural rights are as important in the promotion of a culture of peace as social and political rights.

Equality between women and men was the fourth area of action. The follow up to the Beijing Conference earlier this year in the Special Session of this General Assembly showed us how far we still have to go. In fact, in many areas, there has been backsliding since Beijing, rather than progress. Important groups of countries seem to be reluctant to continue to honour commitments they accepted at Beijing; others are interested only in the promotion of an extremely shallow and provocative interpretation of women's rights. In the Security Council, two weeks ago, the discussion on women and peace and security was an interesting one, but it established just how marginal a role women continue to play in the promotion of peace.

Democratic participation was the fifth area, and this forms the foundation on which everything else rests. Over the last decade, democracy had become almost the norm of governance. We welcomed the emergence of the new and restored democracies. Unfortunately, over the last two years, several countries newly emerged into democracy have relapsed into a totalitarian system of governance. Where there is no democracy, where governments are run by the military, it is unlikely that any of the other seven areas of action needed to promote a culture of peace will get any attention. Democracy needs to be defended, and we were pleased therefore that earlier this year a Community of Democracies was formed to do just that. The promotion of democracy and its spirit as a norm should be critical to the work of the United Nations, but it is still far behind other organisations like the OAU and the Commonwealth, which, to their lasting credit, have decided to ostracise those who overthrow democracy. It is time that the UN seriously consider similar action.

Understanding, tolerance and solidarity were the sixth area. Here too, the record is uneven. The attempt to promote dialogue among civilisations is a useful initiative, but it must be truly comprehensive, not restricted to either a rigid or sectarian interpretation of civilisation, or to the promotion of any political objective other than to strengthen a sense of solidarity amongst all the citizens of the world and appreciation and respect for the contribution of the cultures. Experience has shown that even when this solidarity is most desperately needed, as for instance, when disasters strike, the international response is very skewed, and almost entirely determined by political considerations. What has been described poignantly as humanitarian favouritism does not promote the culture of peace.

On the free flow of information and knowledge, the seventh area of action, the Secretary General has reported on the various ways in which information technology can be both used and abused; he has also reminded us of the important role the mass media must play. We endorse his comments. While the Secretary General has concentrated on the flow of information, it is also at least equally important that there should be a free flow of knowledge. Knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, is now in fact shared less freely than it was earlier. Since we live in an era defined by knowledge, those who are denied access to it will by definition fall further and further behind; if a permanent under-class is thereby created, global peace can never be established.

The last area was international peace and security. If democracy is the soil in which we plant a culture of peace, international peace and security is its fruit. But, though this might appear a tautology, there is much that can be done by the UN to promote a culture of peace in the actions taken to promote peace and security. The most obvious, and certainly the most important, is nuclear disarmament. The first truly global peace movement arose to press for universal nuclear disarmament. As long as we live under the threat of nuclear annihilation, the international community can never be said to enjoy security. What is particularly worrisome and dispiriting is that some of the most powerful nuclear weapon states predicate their security on the first use of these weapons, even against those who are not nuclear-armed. This does not reflect a culture of peace, and continuously undermines international peace and security.

Peacekeeping is the instrument the UN has developed over the last fifty years to restore peace and security where it has been seriously breached. Increasingly, the UN believes that a peacekeeping operation will have lasting success only if it helps create and leaves behind a political framework that promotes democracy, human rights, gender equality and an environment that would help sustain economic and social development. These are all elements of a culture of peace. By definition, all this can be done only by peacekeeping forces that have an experience of this at home; it cannot be done by military and police contingents from countries where there is no democratic tradition, or where the military has a practice of overthrowing democracy. For the UN to use such forces in its peacekeeping is to ensure that the objectives it wishes to promote will in fact be subverted. This is self-evident, but we are astonished that the UN does not act upon it.

Mr. President,

This is a broad brush assessment of where we are in the development of a culture of peace. Clearly, much remains to be accomplished, and we would hope that the Secretary General, in his next reports, will cover developments in the work of the UN system in all eight areas of the action needed to promote and nurture a culture of peace.