

PEACE WITHIN AND PEACE WITHOUT

Special Remarks of Former Senator of the Republic of the Philippines & Former United Nations Assistant Secretary General Leticia Ramos Shahani at the Opening Ceremony of the Third International Women's Peace Conference in Dallas, Texas, USA, 10 July 2007

In my capacity as Honorary Co-Chairperson of this Conference, it is a great pleasure to extend a very warm welcome to all of you tonight – women of the world – who come from many countries and places around the globe, eager to meet each other, learn from each other, prepared to share their beliefs and their anxieties with each other and ready to explore and create a common vision for a peaceful world. What a noble and much-needed undertaking!

I should like to first of all congratulate the initiators of this Conference – my dear friends, Vivian Castleberry and Carol Crabtree and the women of Dallas. I was truly surprised when I received last year in my country, the Philippines, a cordial invitation from Carol and Vivian to be part of a preparatory group to organize this Conference. Puzzled, I asked myself – Texan cowboys and an international women's conference? Texas oil magnates and marginalized women in poor countries? Texas national politics and grass-root NGOs? Somehow these combinations seemed incongruous and artificial; it was a great discovery for me that in the Southeast of the USA was a group of dedicated women wanting to invite their sisters around the world to discuss common concerns and vital interests.

And here we are gathered, at last, brought together by our American friends supported by their unwavering faith, hard work, local pride, and anticipated excitement and joy. Let us give the women of Dallas and Texas and all who made this conference possible, a big round of applause to thank them from the bottom of our hearts for giving us this wonderful opportunity to participate in the Third International Women's Peace Conference.

Since the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, that is, twelve years ago, there has been no major international assembly of women, convened by Governments or by a large group of international non-governmental organizations. There have been several reasons given for this absence of the gender agenda from the world stage: (1) the main plans of action adopted at United Nations conferences on women remain unimplemented at the national and grass-root levels; (2) it is too expensive, for the United Nations or any interested Government, to mount another international conference on women; (3) other priority issues like globalization, climate change, terrorism have displaced women's concerns in the international agenda. These reasons are valid but they should not deter women themselves from filling this vacuum and deciding to do something about it. This is why this women's peace conference in 2007 is significant and unique. Let us all cooperate to make our Conference a real success.

We have outstanding women participating in this conference – the Nobel Prize Laureates – Ms. Betty Williams, Ms. Jody Williams, Ms. Rigoberta Menchu Tum – and other champions of the cause of women, respected in many areas of endeavor. It is a privilege to share their company as it must also be a great opportunity for them to meet all of you. The vibrations of sympathy, the heartbeats of mothers, the struggles of young women, the undying aspirations of wise women; this collective synergy can be felt, like a palpable presence, in this hall tonight. But let us not forget that we also have men with us in this assembly and we also welcome them. We know that they are allies of women who can provide the partnership so important for human welfare and solidarity.

The main theme of our conference is about the role of women in peace-making. We have to plant seeds of peace in this conference which we should nurture, through the years, into mature plants and trees, which can give shade and relief in situations of anger and hatred. How, indeed, do we create peace?

Peace Within

I shall start with something so obvious that it is easily overlooked and taken for granted and that is, peace begins with our inner selves. The Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) opens with this moving statement: “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.” There is no escape from the self-evident truth that violence and hatred originate in the dark recesses of the human mind and heart; in the same way, the hopes for a better tomorrow are lit by a radiant vision inspired from within ourselves. We, who are advocates of peace, must first strive to be peaceful with ourselves and more than that, we should manifest our inner peace and non-violent philosophy in our daily behavior and lifestyle if we are to live in peace with our families and with the outside world. Women, as mothers, understand peace instinctively for they want to raise happy children whom they want to live in a peaceful world.

This gathering tonight is a demonstration of that universal longing for peace within and outside ourselves, the origin of which is a spiritual insight signaling to us that peace and harmony are the basic conditions of human life without which we cannot hope to evolve as human beings and families nor advance as communities and nations. A dependable guide in combining the inner and outer worlds of peace is Mahatma Gandhi, the spiritual and political leader of India and the father of the Indian nation. He was single-minded in his quest for God and truth but social reform and the struggle for the independence of his country were his chosen playing fields; he did not follow the monastic, isolated path. Gandhi once said: “I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind and that I could not do unless I took part in politics.” But why is peace, all the same, so elusive, fragile and difficult to sustain? Because, as Gandhi found out through his own experience, there has to be a deep personal commitment to be peaceful, that is, not to be angry or violent or greedy in thought, word and deed, even if provoked or victimized. As peace advocates, we must be at peace with ourselves first and with others, becoming non-violent in thought which does not necessarily manifest itself immediately in action. This is not easy to do but we

should strive to achieve this stage of awareness. I am glad to note that there are several workshops focusing on celebrating and utilizing inner peace, an indispensable component of peace among individuals as well as among nations.

Peace among Nations

The perfect peace we desire, that is, peace within and peace without, cannot hardly be achieved simultaneously because many events are beyond our control, in terms of time and space. In the relations among nations, for example, the beginnings of the Arab-Israeli conflict go back to Biblical times. In the same way, the seeds of the Cuban-American enmity were already planted during the discovery of the Americas by two ethnic groups coming from Europe with different cultures, the Anglo-Saxons and the Latins. Throughout the world, decades of misunderstanding, inequality and oppression have led to deep-rooted conflicts which defy solution. As a result, many of the early proponents of peace become angry, frustrated and blinded by hatred when they discover that events are beyond their control and influence. With this frame of mind and heart, there can be no peace, only increased bitterness and renewed violence which becomes cyclical in nature. Peace does not only mean the absence of violence. It requires the practice of virtues by all parties concerned such as truthfulness, respect for the human rights of others, tolerance and, yes, gentleness.

I believe that a necessary step which women peace advocates should take in our confused and troubled times is to be serious students of the geography, history and foreign policies of our respective countries. If I may be allowed to say so, this is particularly important for Americans since their country is the only super-power in existence today. I say this not only as a former diplomat of the Philippines but as an active NGO at present. You might be tempted to say: "But we have nothing to do with the State Department or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of my country. We don't care about Government! We just want to help create peaceful conditions and make friends with like-minded people." I suppose for many the careers of ambassadors or diplomats are too far removed from their daily lives. But what diplomats do to promote peaceful

conditions is important for they implement their countries' foreign policies in their respective posts. What the American Ambassador does in Iraq daily can advance the cause of terrorism or peace. What the Chinese Ambassador in Washington D.C. decides about his priorities in relation to the US trade deficit can affect the lives of many Americans. What the Philippine Ambassador does in Saudi Arabia to protect the human rights of Filipino women workers in that country reflects the extent to which the Philippine Government values the dignity and worth of their female migrant workers. We must study the foreign policies of countries; we should start with our own, then with our neighbors and the regions around and then, of course, to the larger world beyond. Our advocacy for peace in the outside world, for it to be effective, must be based on fact and supported by a reality check --- in other words, women peace advocates must engage the diplomats. In this connection, I am glad to see that Ambassador Swanee Hunt and former United Nations Undersecretary Gillian Sorensen are one of our speakers at this Conference.

Power and Enlightened Self-Interest in the Relations among Nations

There seem to be two forces which motivate and push individuals as well as nations as they interact with each other. On the one hand, there is the desire to live in peace with one's neighbors and with the rest of the world. On the other, there is the drive to compete to the extent of wanting to dominate the weaker ones and be acknowledged as the superior presence in the neighborhood or within the geographic region. These two contradictory forces can also be complimentary. In my view, it is in coming to terms with these two seemingly opposite tendencies one, towards sustained harmony and the other towards intense competition that we can create the conditions for peace in the world; a "win-win" situation, as modern managers call it.

Henry Kissinger once said: "Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac." Lord Acton was more explicit when he made the sharp observation about human nature: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." It is the desire for power which drives individuals and nations to seek to dominate others. The weaker, less efficient parties

suffer and become non-competitive in an unequal system where only power and wealth dominate. Are we right in thinking that women care less for power than men, that our instincts are to prefer giving and sharing rather for monopolizing and controlling? If so, we should think about ways and means to maximize this resource for the cause of peace.

Globalization

There is another development, which goes beyond relations among nations, which began to be widely felt in the 1990s and which has become a major force in creating both peaceful conditions and conflict in our world today – that is, globalization, the exchange not only of goods and services but also of knowledge and information. From time immemorial, the world, of course, has been steadily globalizing, when men began to trade over land and sea. But the revolutionary phenomenon we face today is that information technology has made it possible to inter-connect the entire world until its remotest corners, making it possible to outsource jobs and factories, as if distance did not matter. This explains the sudden and rapid emergence of India, which although still poor in many sectors of its economy, has jumped over to a competitive level of economic growth because of the world-wide demand for its information technology and its trained middle class and because of a more open and democratic economic system. In the same way, Chinese entrepreneurs can use the latest digital technology and with cheaper labor costs have made China, still a communist state, very competitive in many areas. The Philippines, on a much smaller scale, is profiting from the outsourcing of jobs to call and medical transcription centers in the country, thus giving young people a level of salary hitherto undreamt of. What does this mean for the prospects of peace? Globalization has enormous implications for peace because it can be a force to bring more equal opportunities for people but it can also entrench class and inequality, giving people who possess the technology and knowledge to dominate the weaker and ignorant ones. Creative individuals, Governments and corporations are the main players in this “flat world” as the author, Thomas Friedman, aptly called our digitalized world, but inequality and, therefore, conflict and wars will persist, even with the most sophisticated technology, unless human beings learn to share with each other and care for each other,

no matter how wide the economic disparity between them or how far way they are from each other. I hope that women will contribute to a fair and more humane “flattened world.”

I can think of no other way in bringing the spiritual and moral dimensions of a globalized world than to quote from the recent commencement address of Bill Gates at Harvard this summer. Let us listen to the world’s richest man and Harvard’s most successful drop-out but who has his moral and spiritual compass pointing in the right direction. On this occasion, Gates said:

“I learned a lot here at Harvard about new ideas in economics and politics. I got great exposure to the advances made in the sciences. But humanity’s greatest advances are not its discoveries, but in how those discoveries are applied to reduce inequity ... Yes, inequity has been with us forever, but the new tools we have to cut through complexity have not been with us forever. They are new! They can help us make the most of our caring ... and that’s why the future can be different from the past ... The defining and ongoing innovations of this age – biotechnology, the computer, the Internet ... give us a chance we’ve never had before to end extreme poverty and death from preventable disease.”

Gates advice to Harvard graduates also applies to us: “Don’t let complexity stop you. Be activists. Take on the big inequities.” I hope that women will respond to the spiritual challenge in our globalized knowledge and information society.

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We live in dangerous, troubled and uncertain times. No country or, for that matter, no individual, however powerful or wealthy, seems to be safe from harm or danger. Our globalizing society freely exchanges goods and services with similar ease as it does dangerous drugs, nuclear bombs and devices for terrorism. Nature’s fury spares no one.

The world is heading where? Human society has lost its way because it has discarded its moral and spiritual compass. Governments and even the United Nations cease to address the needs of humanity because they limit themselves to technical and scientific approaches. Eventually these seemingly objective and legal methods become bankrupt or wither away because they lack the moral and spiritual elements to revitalize them. Peace processes and negotiations fail for lack of trust, tolerance and human solidarity.

But we should not despair because around the globe is a spiritual awakening to the power of the inner life which overcomes physical problems and transcends material limitations. May the participants of this conference catch the signals of this spiritual reawakening and recapture the basic human values of caring and sharing. And this is possible because our individual experience with conflict and communal tension demonstrates that what matters in daily living is the acceptance of others on a basis of mutual trust and equitable sharing, not hatred or rejection. The history of nations has likewise proven that what triumphs in the end is power tempered with justice and respect for the rights of others. Women, with their talent for nurturing and sharing understand these truths instinctively. They can show how to administer power with justice as they do in their homes. It is about time that more of us, women, step forward and participate actively in the affairs of our communities and countries, making a difference this time with the virtues of inner peace, non-violence and respect for the human rights of others. Let the women now ring the bells of equality and justice, of freedom and fair play whose message is: LET US LIVE TOGETHER IN PEACE! In partnership with men imbued with similar ideals, let us build, hand-in hand, shoulder-to-shoulder, the foundations of a lasting inner and outer peace!

But first of all, let us work together during the next six days for a most successful and memorable conference here in Dallas, Texas!

Thank you.