

Message to the Second Osaka Conference
on World Peace

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I thank you for the opportunity to send a message to the second Osaka Conference on World peace. I regret being unable to join my colleagues from the United Nations University who are participating in this important discussion on the preparation for life in peace.

I would like to take this opportunity to place before you some of my thoughts on non-violence and the quality that I call social resilience. A capacity for action without violence and the development of a civic culture that can mediate conflict without resort to violence are both essential elements, in my view, of the preparation for life in peace.

Violence has been a perpetual theme in the history of our species. But our era does seem to be characterized by a breakdown of many of the restraints on violence that have been operative in the past. We can see this in the greater willingness to flout the laws of war that protect non-combatants; the increasing reliance on indiscriminate violence and terrorism as a routine method of striking an adversary or publicizing a cause or defending the status quo; the seeming rarity of negotiated ends to armed conflicts. What most distinguishes our times, however, is the power of the means of destruction human beings now have at their disposal, and the easy availability of many extremely powerful weapons to any group with cash or credit. We cannot dismiss the possibility that even nuclear weapons may eventually be bought, stolen or fabricated from stolen materials by groups or governments willing to hold the whole world as hostage.

Despite the unprecedented power and availability of weapons, it must be said that the record of violence in achieving its objectives is, in recent years, a dismal one. Witness the intense and spreading destruction in the Middle East, the stalemate in the Gulf war, the growing intransigence of the South African government in the face of armed attacks. In the latter case, non-violent demonstrations have exerted more effective pressure for change, both domestically and internationally, than violence-- violent resistance has in fact given the government an excuse for greater use of violence itself.

Under present conditions, violence is very difficult to bring under control once it begins. Weapons are too easily available. The polity is too fragmented. Sections of the population, especially among the young, are too alienated from the existing system. Rival groups become too easily and quickly polarized, leading to collapse of the moderate center. The terribly high costs, and the increasingly apparent ineffectiveness of violence, compel us to emphasize prevention of violence.

Any hope of minimizing violence depends on finding and developing alternative methods of struggle. A world free of violence would not be a world

free of conflict. Today, we are beset with conflicts that stem from the denial of freedom, rights, needs, and self-expression. It must be clear that giving up violence does not mean giving up the fight against unjust and oppressive conditions.

A proven alternative mode of struggle is non-violent action. Non-violence is not just an ideal; it is also a tactic or even a strategy. Its effectiveness as a strategy of the outgunned has been repeatedly demonstrated: in the Quit-India movement, in the US civil rights movement, and more recently in the Philippines, where the heavily armed Marcos government was unable to resist the massive demonstration of popular support for the opposition led by Corazon Aquino. Also, it should not be forgotten that for all its violent rhetoric and its subsequent record of violence, the Iranian revolution was a non-violent revolution-- a revolution of the popular demonstration, the sermon, the cassette, all leading up to a massive withdrawal of support from the Shah's government.

Unlike brute force, non-violence respects and draws upon the morality of the adversary. It does not depend upon hatred, aggression, or unthinking obedience to motivate its practitioners. Rather, it unifies the morality of means and ends, and in so doing stimulates the development of the participants and increases support for its cause from the uncommitted. Non-violence does not suppress reason, but frees it from inertia. In the process, it opens the door to negotiation, and builds up a more permanent system of trust.

Mahatma Gandhi thought that the absence of self-confidence was the single most significant block to non-violent action. Other barriers include fear, despair that nothing can change, indifference, inconvenience and the power of inertia that makes people oblivious to the existence of choice and encourages them to be submissive. Gandhi understood that the non-violent society begins with the restoration of dignity to the individual human being, and proceeded from there to the development of wider societal resilience.

Societal resilience is the quality that permits people and institutions to interact with each other without their conflicts erupting into violence. Resilience allows a people to adapt to change without losing their cultural identity. Resilience permits faith in a system of justice to be maintained even in the face of flaws in the system; a single travesty or even a series of them will not bring about rejection of the system as a whole. The concept of resilience is quite different from that of stability. Stability under oppressive conditions means the perpetuation of violence. The interaction of resilience and order creates a capacity for adaptation without chaos. The lack of resilience in anyone of three dimensions creates the conditions for violence. Change without resilience leads to alienation and loss of identity; a system of justice without resilience turns predictable human failures into catalysts for polarization; order without resilience leads to oppression and a corresponding resistance.

Building social resilience is not a task only for the state, though the

state can play an important role. But the quality of resilience lies in the much broader sphere of civic culture. A collective commitment to the public good, to managing conflict without violence, depends as much on community groups, non-governmental organizations, religious institutions involving both clergy and laity, volunteer groups, political parties, educational institutions, the media and so forth-- all of which have the responsibility and the capability for nurturing a sense of civic responsibility.

Existing social institutions must become the vehicle for creating and expressing this sense of responsibility, but it may also be necessary to create new kinds of truly representative institutions at the national and local levels, to cultivate the habit of thinking collectively but pluralistically about the public good. Political culture is nurtured by a broad approach to public affairs and civil and political action, which cuts across the divisions within the nation.

There is little doubt that violence will continue to mar the political and social landscape for the foreseeable future. Within many societies, the disparities are so great, the injustices so gross, and the privileged so fearful of and resistant to change that violence will be turned to as a last resort. The irony that history has taught us so often is that the use of violence, however justified, may demolish the very goals and ideals that were sought, and create the mirror image of the injustice it sought to destroy.