

Toward a New Ethic of Human Survival

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Tokyo Forum

Ethics of Human Survival

ICHI Independent Commission on International
Humanitarian Issues

Tokyo, Japan

10 June 1985

Professor Ogata, President Shimokobe, Your Highness, Fellow
Commissioners, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

On behalf of the United Nations University, as well as on my own behalf as a member of the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues, let me warmly welcome you all to this Forum which we hope will be an occasion for a wide-ranging and valuable discussion on questions of international humanitarian concern. This is a central area of interest in our work at the UN University which is enjoined by its Charter to deal with pressing global problems of human survival, development and welfare. May I also take this opportunity to express deep appreciation to the co-sponsor of this Forum, the National Institute for Research Advancement, which has helped so greatly in making this event possible.

We are here to bring to your attention to and elicit your views on the issues on which the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues is working. Our discussions will turn essentially on how to ease the lot of three types of victims evident in such sad numbers in today's world - victims of armed conflict, victims of natural or man-made disasters, and, perhaps the most tragic, for they are locked into a seemingly unending state of misery and suffering, the victims of circumstance - the most vulnerable members of the human family. Included in the ranks of these are the displaced, the stateless, various indigenous populations, the "street children" of urban slums, women in many parts of the world, and a host of others neglected, exploited, and bypassed by society.

Efforts to improve the plight of these victims need to be set within the context of a larger search for shared sets of human values, ones that can both honour the diversity of this world's many peoples and cultures and undergird the notion of our oneness as human beings on this troubled planet. The turbulence, confusion and change of our age are such that we must somehow find ways to adopt an overarching ethical framework of shared values to help guide the affairs of men and women everywhere.

By many measures, our world today is afflicted with the pathology of violence. This ranges from senseless random instances of civic violence such

as the recent deaths on the playing fields of Europe, to the repeated sectarian bloodshed in South Asia, to the 130 or more wars that have been initiated since the end of World War II.

Everywhere, we seem to be witnessing a rise in the incidence of anti-humanitarian acts - genocide, torture, arbitrary and summary executions, mass displacements of peoples, forced disappearances, threats to the survival of vulnerable groups, callous disregard for basic standards of human rights, and disregard for the protection of civilians in time of war. There is also, of course, the ultimate anti-humanitarian act: the threat of destruction of humanity itself posed by the hair-trigger confrontation of nuclear weapons.

Already shadowed by the tragedy of famine and conflict in Africa, our sense of pervading human tragedy is heightened by the tragic news from Bangladesh which, in its own way, due to the compelling search by the hungry for land to till, was as much a man-made as a natural disaster. It is but one more sad spot on this globe where human need and environmental fragility have conspired to breed suffering and despair.

We will be hearing shortly about some of the proposals for action developed for the Commission to address the famine in Africa, whose cruelest toll is among the children, endangering even the survivors' physical and mental capacities for growth. Already there is talk of a "lost generation" of Africa's children - those who, but for circumstances totally beyond their control, could be the desperately needed vigorous minds and bodies to help that continent launch its course in the 21st century. This danger spotlights the absolute necessity of ensuring that help for Africa goes far beyond relief for the immediate crisis; the absolute necessity of ensuring that Africa is helped to rebuild for itself, in its own way, its capacity for growth and development. Otherwise, in the words of Bradford Morse, head of UNDP, we may save peoples' lives but rob them of their future.

The causes of the misery and violence which stalk the globe today lie deep in the inability of states and societies to deal with the sweeping forces of change which characterize our age. Out of this inability is bred fear and intolerance. Powerful longings arise for simple, reductionist explanations whose foundations in reality are so insecure that they cannot co-exist with other approaches or beliefs.

The current situation must further be put in the context of an already crowded world which will likely double its population within the next half century - and if this increase is not accompanied by more rational and humane policies to husband and distribute resources, it seems bound to come with some grim outriders: hunger, rising unemployment, despair, spreading human misery and suffering, and more violence.

It is in light of this fearful concatenation of present realities and future certainties that we need urgently to mount a search for an ethic of human survival and solidarity. For it seems clear to me that the sweep and urgency of the globe's present concerns have begun to escape the religious precepts and ethical norms by which humankind has lived over the centuries. Ways must be found to relate some of the ancient and universally accepted moral precepts to the scale and complexity of interconnected problems in a world of divided and often competing states.

It is important in this context to recognize the nature of the historical process in which contemporary humanitarian issues are imbedded, which is one of tremendous turmoil, fragmentation and vulnerability - particularly in the developing countries. An important consequence of this process is the emergence of new states and non-state actors that have their own distinctive cultural traditions and value configurations. These new actors did not participate in formulating the international consensus on humanitarian norms, primarily based on eighteenth century European concepts, and have never been asked to give their views on it.

Certainly one factor in the fragility of the present humanitarian consensus could be that the consensus itself has not drawn sufficiently upon non-Western cultural, legal and religious traditions. There is now a pressing need for a new consensus that embraces different philosophies and systems of belief and finds not their lowest common denominators, but their highest common values. We will have to stake out a new common ground on which to establish our obligations to the human community and to the survival of the human race. This is a task that is not only the business of governments - it is a challenge that demands the participation and acceptance of whole peoples, cultures and societies.

This is so because one essential characteristic of a workable set of humanitarian ethics, in my view, is inclusiveness. It cannot be applied selectively without losing its credibility. Only if it is based on human solidarity can it function at all.

This, in turn, is grounded in the inescapable realities of interdependence, from which no nation can insulate itself. The willingness, voluntarily, to blunt the sharper edges of national sovereignty can be seen in all successful efforts to manage interdependence. At the same time, values with universal application will have to be reconciled, in a humane way, with the often conflicting but appropriate interests of individual nationhood.

In order to evolve this overarching ethical framework, a number of major steps will be required. I can only enumerate some of them briefly here, with the hope they may engender debate during our deliberations.

In the articulation of humanitarian norms, we will need to base them on a flexible but inclusive international consensus. This will require identifying a few irreducible values - but these may have different configurations among themselves and in relation to other values, depending on their cultural setting. Each government will have a stake in helping identify the core of the humanitarian ethic, but so too will various cultures and peoples within states.

Another area for action must encompass the establishment and ratification of legal instruments to raise the standard of accountability with respect to these norms. Following on this, there is also a need to build national and international constituencies to make both the norms and the instruments of this expression politically effective.

These efforts will have to be accompanied by a widening of opportunities for development of the inner resources of the human spirit - through the arts, through religion, and even through a sense of humour and the ability

to laugh. By broadening and encouraging the range of channels for expression, we would be enhancing the resilience of society, a very precious resource in a world buffeted by tumultuous change.

We can already see many signs, in various cultures, of a reassertion of moral values, as a counter to materialistic explanations of human problems. The Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues is trying to strengthen that awakening spirit by seeking to provide practical recommendations for action in the context of a coherent ethical perspective. We will very much welcome, in our discussions here today, the new insights that I feel are bound to arise from this distinguished audience. I am very much looking forward to the discussions here today. Thank you very much.

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