Remarks on the 30th Anniversary of
Rissho Kosei-Kai of New York

By

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Embracing Life: Wisdom and Compassion in Action
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Rissho Kosei-kai of New York
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I welcome this opportunity to thank Rissho Kosei-kai of New York for organizing this commemorative symposium and to extend my warmest congratulations on the occasion of its 30th anniversary. I also wish to recognize and commend Reverend Yasutaka Watanabe for his many efforts to promote peace and harmony among all nations and religions. It is also a privilege for me to participate with the other distinguished panellists.

My remarks will not be those of a scholar, philosopher, or theologian, however much I appreciate their contributions to disarmament and other great goals of the United Nations. I will instead speak as a practitioner, someone who has worked on disarmament and non-proliferation issues at the United Nations for many years.

Let me begin by briefly summarizing the formal goals of the United Nations in the field of disarmament. In 1959, the General Assembly put “general and complete disarmament under effective international control” on its agenda—a term that encompasses the total elimination of all weapons of mass destruction and the limitation of conventional arms to specific purposes of self-defence and peacekeeping. The Final Document of the General Assembly’s first special session on disarmament in 1978 referred to general and complete disarmament as the “ultimate objective” of the United Nations in this field, a goal that still remains today.

A great deal of what the UN does in the field of disarmament and non-proliferation is dedicated to the pursuit of these goals, along with other mandates received from the States parties to multilateral treaties. One could say that the various institutions that comprise what we call the “UN disarmament machinery” perform, in effect, as a kind of assembly line for the creation and maintenance of global norms in these fields. It is the job of the Disarmament Commission to meet once a year to deliberate two agenda items, typically dealing with nuclear and conventional weapons, and to seek agreement on voluntary “guidelines” at the end of a three-year cycle of such meetings. The First Committee of the General Assembly considers specific resolutions, which, though non-binding, carry political weight. It is the task of the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, the world’s single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum, to produce legally-binding obligations in this field.

My own Office for Disarmament Affairs advises the Secretary-General and undertakes numerous activities to promote disarmament efforts at global, regional and subregional levels. These include, for example, our assistance to Member States—upon their request—in pursuing their own disarmament-related activities, our extensive administrative and substantive assistance at gatherings of States parties to multilateral treaties, our educational programmes and publications, and our relations and cooperation with non-governmental organizations and civil society.

The norms we seek to advance at the UN are universal in scope—they advance the ideals and concrete self-interests of our Member States by their very function of serving the interests of all humanity. The goals of the United Nations—including poverty reduction, protecting the environment, promoting justice, and striving to protect and
defend the dignity of the human individual—all of these tacitly assume the non-existence of a nuclear war. In a very real sense, the constituency of disarmament includes all of humanity including future generations.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has often referred to disarmament and nonproliferation as global public goods precisely because their benefits are indivisible and enjoyed by all Member States—indeed, by all people. Disarmament, in short, represents the fusion of idealism and realism—it is the right thing to do, and it works.

In fact, visitors to the United Nations could not miss this famous line which can be found in one of the oldest religious books and is scripted right in front of the United Nations Secretariat Building. It reads “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”

But we are not working alone. The partnership between the United Nations and civil society has a long history that has only strengthened throughout the years. In the field of disarmament and non-proliferation, one of the most important roles of civil society is to stimulate constructive political action. Historically, civil society has had some significant achievements in raising awareness and capturing the public conscience. Examples would include efforts in 1950s and 1960s to end atmospheric nuclear testing and more recently working for multilateral treaties to ban anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions. Additional efforts have long been underway to strengthen international cooperation against the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Here I would like to express my appreciation to Rissho Kosei-kai for its close and longstanding relationship with the United Nations, which has featured cooperation on a broad range of important activities. It has actively supported UNICEF’s campaign activities. It has advocated environmental causes. It has championed efforts to end hunger and poverty. And it has persistently worked to promote progress in achieving the great goals of disarmament and world peace.

Rissho Kosei-kai has long been an active member of the NGO Committee for Disarmament, Peace and Security and its founder, Reverend Niwano, addressed special sessions of the United Nations General Assembly devoted to disarmament. As a founding member of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, Rissho Kosei-kai launched the “Arms Down! Global Youth Campaign for Shared Security” which raised awareness about the importance of abolishing nuclear weapons, stopping the proliferation and misuse of conventional weapons and redirecting ten per cent of military expenditures to achieve the United Nations Millennium Goals (MDGs) by 2015.
I would be remiss not to give particular mention to the fact that Rissho Kosei-kai had supported the work and activities of the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and the Pacific (UNRCPOD) with a substantial endowment that has been crucial in sustaining the Centre’s operations and programmes. As recently as July of this year, two of its representatives visited the Centre in Kathmandu and held very productive discussions on areas and activities of mutual interest including possible additional support to the Centre. The Office for Disarmament Affairs is most grateful for that longstanding support and very much look forward to exploring new opportunities for future cooperation.

The world community now stands at an important juncture. Circumstances have changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War. A sustained and serious effort to think practically and realistically about the challenges of achieving disarmament is itself a moral imperative. And I am pleased that there is a chorus of prominent military and political figures and several international initiatives, all of which are endorsing this very goal. Although nuclear weapons cannot be dis-invented, we still have a moral obligation to ban them.

We need to make compassion a dynamic force in our world. Compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries and help make our world a better place to live. In their hearts, every human being longs for peace. The “Commitment to Global Peace” outcome document of the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders held in 2000, eloquently stated that “A true culture of peace must be founded upon the cultivation of the inner dimension of peace, which is the heritage of religious and spiritual tradition”.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has also addressed this theme of our shared humanity. In his address to the Fourth Global UN Alliance of Civilization Forum held in Doha in December 2011, he outlined five specific opportunities for progress. They are focused on the following challenges: empowering women and youth; preventing conflict through dialogue; building a safer world through peace and tolerance in places overrun by divisions and discord; helping nations in transition; and achieving sustainable development.

Clearly peace is imperilled by the ever-quickening race for armaments, the widening gap between the rich and the poor within and among the nations, and by violations of human rights all over the world. The problems of disarmament and the achievement of peace cannot be found through the stockpiling of weapons.

Nobody expects nuclear disarmament to occur overnight, nor can it be seriously pursued without safeguards and effective verification mechanisms. But undoubtedly, persistent and effective efforts by individuals and civil society groups could influence the public agendas of many countries when it comes to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.
More than we think, success in these fields depends greatly upon the persistent pursuit of these universal efforts. In this context, I wish to recall the World Conference on Religion and Peace held in Kyoto, Japan, in October 1970 which was a historic event organized to "discuss urgent present obstacles to peace in the light of common religious principles with the view to facilitating common action". The conference found that we share:

- A conviction of the fundamental unity of the human family, and the equality and dignity of all human beings;
- A sense of the sacredness of the individual person and his conscience;
- A sense of the value of human community;
- A realization that might is not right; that human power is not self sufficient and absolute;
- A belief that love, compassion, selflessness, and the force of inner truthfulness and of the spirit have ultimately greater power than hate, enmity, and self-interest;
- A sense of obligation to stand on the side of the poor and the oppressed as against the rich and the oppressors; and
- A profound hope that good will finally prevail.

These sentiments are valid today as they were valid then.

I would like to conclude my remarks by another very illuminating quote of the Dalai Lama, and I quote “Disarmament is compassion in practice. What is required, therefore, is both inner disarmament, at the level of our individual hatred, prejudice, and intolerance, and outer disarmament, at the level of nations and states. If the twentieth century was a century of violence, let us make the twenty-first a century of dialogue.

I know that the partnership between the UN, civil society, and concerned Member States will help to keep nuclear disarmament high on the international agenda, and that this partnership will facilitate its eventual achievement. May this partnership between the United Nations and civil society continue to grow over the years ahead, and may the entire world soon reap its bounteous rewards.

Thank you for your attention.