

A CULTURE OF PEACE - THE TIME HAS COME

By Federico Mayor ()*

BARCELONA, Oct (IPS) The time has come. The culture of war, the economy of war, and the hegemony of the "globalisers" have been a catastrophic failure and the cause of incalculable levels of suffering, hunger, extreme poverty, and social affliction. A "new beginning" is needed urgently here at the dawn of a new century and a new millennium.

Force, violence, and war have always predominated, to the point that history seems to be little more than an endless succession of battles and conflicts in which peace is a momentary break. So it has been century after century, with fleeting periodic attempts at emancipation.

Educated to use force, accustomed to heeding the law of the most powerful, trained in the use of the muscles more than of the mind, humanity has watched itself be dragged into the bloodiest possible conflicts. Enmity instead of friendship is the rule. Neighbours are not seen as brothers with whom we share a common destiny but as adversaries, enemies to be annihilated. And so our past is marked out by an endless chain of conflicts, attacks and reprisals, vanquished and victors, rancour and ill-will, physical and spiritual violence.

Fortunately there is a parallel, invisible history whose links were forged day by day out of the unselfishness, the generosity, and the creativity that distinguish the human species. It is a dense fabric, incomparable and permanent, because it is the product of many lives tenaciously dedicated daily to building the bastions of peace.

"There are no roads to peace; peace is the road," Mahatma Gandhi reminded us. A road oriented to principles and values. By justice, before all else. Peace is both a condition and a result, both seed and fruit. It is necessary to identify the causes of conflict to be able to prevent it. Avoiding conflict is the greatest victory.

UNESCO, the United Nations organisation charged explicitly with building peace through education, science, culture, and communication, recalls in the preamble of its constitution that it is the "democratic principles" of justice, liberty, equality, and solidarity that must illuminate this great transition from a culture of violence and war to a culture of dialogue and reconciliation. The great programme "Towards a Culture of Peace", of the 1990s, was a UNESCO initiative.

The Declaration and Plan of Action for a Culture of Peace, approved in September 1999, establishes that the culture of peace is an interweaving of values, attitudes, and behaviour that reflect a respect for life, the human being, and human dignity.

The Plan of Action contains measures based on education, race, development, and freedom of expression that must be put into practice to bring about the great transition from force to the word: to foster education in peace, human rights, democracy, mutual tolerance, and comprehension, national and international; to fight every form of discrimination; to promote democratic principles and practices in every area of society; to fight poverty and bring about a form of development that is endogenous and sustainable and that benefits everyone and grants all people a decent life; to mobilise society in order to ignite in the young a burning desire to find new ways of living based on reconciliation, tolerance, and generosity, and to

reject all forms of oppression and violence, the just distribution of wealth, the free flow of information and shared learning.

The 2000 Manifesto of the International Year for a Culture of Peace, signed by more than 110 million people around the world, establishes "the commitment in my daily life, in my family, my community, and my region, to respect all lives, reject violence, free my generosity, safeguard the planet, reinvent solidarity, and listen to others in order to understand them". This should serve to involve us and implicate us personally in this process that can lead in a few years to a brightening of the horizons that are so dark today and make possible a peaceful coexistence of all inhabitants of the earth.

There have already been many regions, countries, and municipalities that have incorporated the culture of peace into their constitutions and statutes. It is very important that this trend spread, though even more important is the awareness among people that the moment has come to stop accepting the imposition of and blind obedience to power. Citizens are ceasing to be spectators and becoming actors. They are abandoning silence and fear and becoming agents of peace instead of vassals.

Today long-distance participation via mobile phone, SMS, and the Internet has made possible a radical change in the fundamental component of all democracies -the expression of the will of the people.

Much has been accomplished in these ten years. But the inertia of the vested interests and the resistance of the most prosperous to share more are an obstacle to the emergence of a culture of peace, the word, understanding, and the formation of alliances.

But soon this will change. The hour has come. (END/COPYRIGHT IPS)

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