

The Hard Work of Peace

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It is a pleasure for me to address this gathering of humanitarians, scholars and Peace Laureates on a subject which is of great concern to us all: the urgent imperative of the international community to bring excessive military spending and the global arms trade under control.

I am not an arms trade expert, but I do fervently believe in the cause of peace; and, like many here today, I can bear witness to the profound destruction caused by cheap and abundant weaponry. When I assumed the presidency of Costa Rica in 1986, Central America was tortured by various civil wars which caused more than two hundred thousand casualties, mostly civilian. Small arms were killing our youth, maiming our children and undermining our future; and yet in the halls of international diplomacy, it seemed that the only weapon worth fearing was the nuclear bomb. Many of us desperately wondered how killing many people little by little, day by day, could somehow be less objectionable than killing many in a single day.

My friends, those tragic times made it clear that peace cannot take root unless the deepest causes of conflict are brought to light, examined, and publicly discussed. Arms betray this delicate process by adding to intolerance, deepening present grievances and making agreement more distant. Today, we cannot ignore the power of so-called “small” arms—pistols, assault rifles, hand grenades— to quicken the flow of fear and insecurity into the very nerve system of international relations.

As in the Cold War, weapons dealers today benefit from a security consensus that focuses almost exclusively on the regulation of weapons of mass destruction, be they nuclear, chemical or biological. I do not intend to downplay the grave danger of these weapons; but the truth is that conventional weapons, as cheap and readily available as batteries and transistor radios, are just as threatening to the security of the free world. The Taliban, al-Qaeda and North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il did not come to power by wielding weapons of mass destruction, but by the local, daily terror inflicted with conventional weapons. Only when they had established tyranny over their own people, were they able to launch aggressive agendas against other nations. Clearly, providing weapons to undemocratic regimes and to human rights abusers is more than just unethical; it is self-defeating.

Its widespread and indiscriminate effects remind us that the arms trade, like terrorism, is impossible for any one country to control. With its countless murky intersections between the legal and the illicit, the arms trade turns the concept of “national security” into a hall of mirrors; no sale of weapons is ever completely safe, as yesterday’s allies become today’s terrorists. No longer beholden to the political demands of an East-West conflict, the arms trade has metastasized since the end of the Cold War, and is now a stronger presence in our world than ever before. And what we have to consider is that the circulation of weaponry in the global marketplace sustains not only the violence of war and genocide, but also the violence of poverty.

By diverting precious resources away from human development, the arms trade is directly implicated in the human crisis lurking at the very core of our modernity. It is a

subsistence crisis when nearly a billion and a half people have no access to clean water, and a billion live in miserably substandard housing. It is a spiritual crisis when—as Gandhi said—many people are so poor that they only see God in the form of bread, and when other individuals seem only to have faith in the capricious "invisible hand" that guides the free market. It is a moral crisis when 35,000 children die each day from malnutrition and disease. And it is a democratic crisis when 1.3 billion people live on an income of less than one dollar per day, and are effectively excluded from public decision-making because of the wrenching poverty in which they live.

As humanity struggles for hope and daily bread, 800 billion dollars were dedicated to military expenditure last year, or 2.5 per cent of the world gross domestic product. According to the United Nations Human Development Program, just five percent of that amount would be sufficient to fund basic education, health care and nutrition, potable water and sanitation to all of the world's people. In other words, it would take only a modest shift in global priorities to alleviate these seemingly intractable development challenges.

Nonetheless, global military spending is once again on the rise, with the rate of increase in 2002 double that of 2001, and overall spending 14 percent higher than in the post-cold war low of 1998. High-income countries account for three-quarters of that expenditure, but military budgets impose a greater burden on developing countries, or more precisely, on the poorest people in those countries. In Pakistan, Myanmar, Eritrea, and Burundi, military spending tops that for health and education combined. And what are the benefits of such spending priorities? States hoard supplies of tanks and weapons to supposedly defend citizens who are dying from hunger, malnutrition and preventable diseases. Meanwhile, whole generations come of age with no possibilities for legitimate employment, but plenty of opportunities to run drugs and guns.

It is bewildering, to say the least, that almost eighty percent of all weapons transfers originate in the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Is there not a terrible irony in linking security to large shipments of weapons, most of which will eventually serve criminals and totalitarian regimes? Of the twenty nine billion dollars in conventional weapons that were sold last year, nearly two thirds went to governments in the developing world. Why are leaders of the hungriest people still buying guns? And why do leaders of the wealthiest people continue to supply them?

The fundamental problem, of course, is one of values. I want to quote my good friend, the late Mahbub ul-Haq, a pioneer of the human development school of thought. In his book Reflections on Human Development, he notes: "Sometime back, Tanzania's president Julius Nyerere asked in legitimate despair, 'must we starve our children to pay our debts?' It is at least as pertinent to ask, must we starve our children to increase our defense expenditure? . . . When our children cry for milk in the middle of the night, shall we give them guns instead?"

That, my friends, is the very image of terrorism.

The events of the last two years have made it chillingly clear that a world where millions endure extreme misery will never be fully secure, even for its most privileged inhabitants. And it is also apparent that the circulation of people, world-views and cultures is increasing, whether we are ready or not for the resulting encounters. Our values will have to follow suit. We can no longer afford to ignore our common humanity or focus our vision narrowly on our own interests, our own people, our own problems. We cannot ignore the cry of that child in the middle of the night.

My friends, in examining the scope of conflict and poverty in our era, we perceive all too clearly that the buildup of arms and its cascade of consequences are the greatest single obstacle

to human development today. We know that with a fraction of the resources now dedicated to the military, it would be possible to move towards the resolution of the profound health, education, hunger and housing problems which afflict the world. Indeed, we could witness the turnaround of these crises within our lifetime.

Humanity cannot wait. The poor and forsaken cannot wait. For that reason, since the end of my presidency I have dedicated much of my time and energy to the adoption of an international code of conduct on arms transfers, an initiative now supported by 18 other Nobel Peace Laureates and many international organizations. The Code, now known as the Arms Trade Treaty, calls for a ban on transfers of weapons to governments that repress fundamental democratic and human rights, or that commit acts of armed international aggression. I am happy to say that last month, we inaugurated a worldwide campaign to ratify this treaty into a binding piece of international law.

I know very well that an effort to regulate the arms trade brings us head to head with the world's most entrenched interest groups, and it could take years, even decades, to move forward. In this struggle, a clear and firm vision of our principles will be essential. Peace is not just a dream; it is hard work, and requires real-world, practical ideas to come to fruition. Some might accuse us of being utopians, but in the end, as Victor Hugo said, "no army can withstand the strength of an idea whose time has come." We are ready; the force of history and the millions of lives imperiled by the arms trade carry us forward.

My friends:

The challenges of the twenty first century are perhaps greater in scope and complexity than in any other point in history. Yet this Eternal City, which has seen the entire spectrum of human experience, from brilliant triumph to appalling tragedy, inspires us to hold firm to our vision of a more just and peaceful century. Now more than ever, the ratification of a set of universal rules on arms transfers is essential, if we still dare to hope that the twenty-first century will be more humane than the previous one. In joining together to call for universal arms control, we are moving towards the creation of a world with more solidarity and less individualism; more honesty and less hypocrisy; more transparency and less corruption; more faith and less cynicism; more compassion and less selfishness. In short, a world with more love.

Thank you.