

# GLOBAL CONFLICTS, HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND SOCIAL WORK ACTION<sup>1</sup>

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'The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant, and so devastating, that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated.'

*- Robert Jackson, chief prosecutor, Nuremberg Tribunal*

Thank you for the honor to be part of this world forum. My gratitude to our Brazilian colleagues, as well as colleagues from the Latin American region and the International Federation of Social Workers for making possible our gathering here as a profession. I remember speaking at the Buenos Aires conference more than ten years ago and that to me was one of the most memorable experiences in international social work. The strong feeling of solidarity blending with music and dancing – very distinctly Latin American, but above all, the very substantial and moving themes of human rights, social justice and peace.

I must tell you that one of my great inspirations as a social worker was my initial exposure to the campaign for human rights in Nicaragua where I met some of our Latin American colleagues who attended the 1984 World Conference in Montreal, Canada – my first real exposure to international social work. I happened to be campaigning too for our detained social workers in the Philippines during the Marcos dictatorship. And in that solidarity gathering, as I look back now, was born the human thrust of the International Federation of Social Workers. However it was only in 1988 when the Human Rights Commission was finally formed where our dear colleague here, Elis Envall played a very significant role.

So I have eagerly looked forward to coming here again because Latin American and Asian peoples share a lot in common- our history of dictatorships and repression, of resistance and revolution and our struggle for human rights and human dignity. So on behalf of our people in Asia and my country Philippines, I bring you all warm solidarity greetings!

Much of the world we have lived in our lifetime had been consumed in global conflicts. We have lived most of our lives in fear and uncertainty. At the start of the millennium, there were fifteen wars, with as much as 24 lesser conflicts ongoing with varying degrees of intensity. Most are interstate wars fuelled as much as racial, ethnic or religious animosities as by ideological fervor. As we talk here a war between Russia and Georgia is ongoing. One distinguishing feature of modern conflicts is that most victims are civilians. During World War I, civilians made up less than 5% of all casualties. Today, more than 80% of those killed and wounded are non-combatants.

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Africa, as we all know, more than any other continents, is a war-torn region with more than 20 major civil wars since 1960. Rwanda, Angola, Sudan, Liberia, Burundi, Uganda, Congo and the Central African Republic are among those that have suffered and continue to suffer serious conflicts.

We also know that the first casualties in wartime are women. In conflict zones, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) observed that sexual violence usually spreads like epidemic. Whether it is civil war, pogroms, or other armed conflicts, all too often women's bodies become part of the battlefield. The victims of large scale sexual atrocities range from baby girls to old women.

In the Balkan wars of the 1990s, women were raped for the purpose of bearing the enemy's children. The European Union estimated 20,000 women in Bosnia alone were victims of rape. The women have been largely left to themselves, traumatized by their experiences and condemned to a life of poverty. Both in the wars in Darfur, Sudan and in the Democratic Republic of Congo, rape victims take most of the blame. In cultures where girls and women are married off and chastity is central to womanhood, all is lost for a woman who loses her honor. The subsequent stigma often is a heavier burden than the assault itself. So it should be no surprise that most of these wounded girls and women keep silent.

An estimated 2 million were victims of the Red Army's sexual cruelties – not only German women, but also Jewish women in hiding, concentration camp survivors and resistance fighters. The shame felt about 'lost honor' created an atmosphere of suicide.' In April 1945, there were more than 5,000 suicides in Berlin. Husbands, fathers and teachers pressured women and girls to end their own lives after Russian soldiers raped them because their honor was their major concern.

During the genocide in Rwanda, mass rape was the rule. The Rwanda Tribunal, a special court set up by the UN to try perpetrators of horrendous crimes was the first in history to describe rape as a possible act of genocide. In 2001, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague, in a landmark Foca case which convicted three Bosnian Serbs of rape, torture and enslavement of Muslim women in 1992, condemned the systematic rape against women as a crime against humanity. The recent UN Security Council resolution recognizing sexual violence as a weapon of war and therefore can be punished under international law is an additional mechanism in the struggle for women's rights.

After the tragic September 11, 2001 incident in New York, it is made clear the direction the US, the remaining superpower after the Cold War is leading the world yet another outbreak of war. Through its so-called 'war on terror', US claims its right to attack any country in the world it arbitrarily identifies as terrorists and maybe hiding weapons of mass destruction, calling them as belonging to the 'axis of evil'. Following this came the expose of the Nuclear Position Review targeting China, Russia, Libya and Syria as 'possible nuclear targets in addition to the axis countries'. Already war is being brought to far-flung areas of the world, causing sufferings of vast numbers of people who have nothing to do with terrorism, let alone the September 11 attacks on the US.

Unfortunately, the US war on terror deliberately singled out Islam and the Islamic world as 'enemy' almost equating Muslim with 'terrorist'. The demonisation of Islam and the creation of public hysteria, which has led to the introduction of unnecessary and dubious anti-terrorist laws, threatening to curtail basic rights and freedoms, make for a very dangerous combination situation in which there is, on the one hand, a recourse to the strengthening of national security laws and introduction of terrorism laws and on the other hand, a creation of an atmosphere of paranoia and hate politics which political opportunists, command forces of violence and organized criminal elements take advantage of for their own ends.'

Just before coming here, my younger sister and her family and more than 150,000 people who live in south Philippines where the population is predominantly Muslims, were forced to evacuate for yet another outbreak of conflict as government and Muslim forces clashed in their bid for control over this resource rich territory. Over the past years, an exodus of thousands and millions of local populations had been displaced due to this war as the Muslims had been fighting for an independent Islamic state for the past 30 years. In many cases, people had been subjected to harassments, threats and discrimination as they always fall suspects as being members of the most wanted terrorist group, the Abu Sayaf with alleged links to Al Qaeda associated with Osama bin Laden, the suspected mastermind of the September 11 bombing. The Philippine government anti-terror alliance with the US, has emboldened the military to keep the war going that had deprived the people of Mindanao their right to peace and development. While so called peace negotiations are going on, people tremble in fear and suffer the usual consequences of war.

What is clear by now is, these wars are getting us to nowhere. While President Bush rejoices over Iraq, reinforcing the outcome of the 1991 Gulf War, the 1999 Kosovo war and the 2001 Afghanistan war, we all are witness to the thousands and millions of casualties – innocent civilians, mostly women, children and elderly who have no say in these wars. The damage is irreparable and whatever is left becomes unsustainable affecting even the future generations. In Iraq alone, 601,000 died since the US invasion. Five million Iraqi children or 35% of all Iraqi children are orphans. In 2007, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated 2.2 million Iraqis have fled to neighboring countries and 2 million were displaced internally. The US spent over \$845 billion with a total cost to the US economy estimated at \$3 trillion. And as war progresses, involved nations devote more and more of their resources to the conflict resulting in ever escalating destruction and unparalleled devastation.

Beyond the erosion of civil liberties, the quality of human life, the value of human dignity risks being diminished over the long term because governments spend the lion share of their budgets on security measures to the neglect of much needed social and economic programs that answer to peoples' basic needs as well as choices and opportunities to become active participants in the countries' decision making. As social workers we have experienced over the last decade or so the decline in government support for welfare, education and health services because huge part of the countries' budget goes to the military, to the guns and ammunitions, to the war!

This is MADNESS.

Where more than half of the world's people in the world live on less than 2 dollars a day and 1.2 billion people live on less than 1 dollar a day; where more than 800 million people go to bed hungry everyday including 300 million children; where for every 3.6 seconds a person dies of starvation and most of these are children; where every year, 6 million children die from malnutrition; where 1 out of 6 world's adults is illiterate and 2/3 of these are women.

And to think that the cost of one AK-47 rifle is enough to buy vitamin A capsules that can prevent blindness of 3,000 one year olds; a 10 million worth of anti-personal landmine is enough to provide immunization to approximately 7.7 million children against 6 deadly childhood diseases; the cost of 23 fighter planes can provide for iodized salt for ten years to protect 1.6 billion people at risk of mental retardation due to iodine deficiency and the cost of 11 radar evading bombers is enough to provide 4 years of primary education to 135 million children who are not in school.

This leads me to a more serious kind of war that similarly kills, that similarly afflicts unimaginable sufferings, not through guns or bombs or mortars, not by the armies and military forces. The US, through its allies, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), through globalization, has increased both domestic and international inequalities, widening the already existing gaps between the richest and the poorest among nations and the richest and the poorest within nations. The fact that 1/5 of the world's population is afflicted by poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy and insecurity is sufficient to conclude that the economic, social and cultural rights of those people are being denied on a massive scale. This phenomenon results to restlessness, rebellions, uprisings and, eventually 'terrorism'. The vulnerabilities of affected sectors have been transforming the sectors into very serious threats' which can eventually become major state security concerns.(Ogata, Cels 2003)

United Nations' food envoy, Jean Ziegler, recently made a statement to the effect that the current hunger crisis amounts to a "silent mass murder". To those mothers and fathers who can no longer feed their children, let alone themselves, Ziegler's message lies close to home. If you were watching your neighbors die around you because of hunger in a world awash with plenty, what would you call that situation? Hungry people are desperate people capable of taking desperate actions.

According to recent estimates, 800 million people are now at risk of starvation; 100 million have joined the ranks of the extremely poor in just the last few months, and development in poor countries has been set back by 7 years. Thousands of children, the elderly and infirm are dying of starvation and malnutrition at this very time. Many governments are increasingly getting nervous as they are starting to sense troubling signs of potential conflicts over scarce food and water resources, both internally and with their neighbours.

This leads me to a phenomenon that is of natural link to the dynamics of globalization, of food crisis – the politics of climate change which, studies show has direct bearing on conflicts.

Paraphrasing UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, he said climate change has the potential to generate wars and represents one of the biggest threats to humanity. Now the hunger

crisis, a human rights violation of global proportions, has raised the spectre of an impending peace and security crisis.

History suggests climate change helps breed political instability. Significantly cooler periods were characterized by large scale crop loss, starvation and conflict. In northeast India, for example, the threat of mass migration sparks renewed conflict in a country already suffering from a dozen insurgencies.

Climate change is not a random situation, but the result of more than 250 years of industrialization by the rich nations which first ignored, and then dismissed the ecological costs inherent to industrial production and consumption based on fossil fuels. Today, on the average, 1 person out of 19 in a developing country will be hit by a climate disaster, compared to 1 out of 1,500 in rich countries. Poor communities and nations are already bearing the brunt of climate change. Rich countries have the resources to implement costly engineering projects, such as sea walls, to adapt to current and future climate impacts while millions in poor countries are left to either swim or drown.

The richest countries belonging to the G8<sup>2</sup> countries represent 65% of the gross world product and the majority of global military power, 7 of them accounted for top military expenditure in the world and all possess world active nuclear arsenals. While the G8 countries represent only 13% of the world's population, 45% of the whole greenhouse gases emitted by these countries have had major impact on climate change. Therefore, the reduction of greenhouse gases for solving the problem of climate change ultimately depends on the decision and actions of these countries.

During the last G8 meeting in July in Sapporo, Hokkaido, Japan, countries declared to reduce greenhouse gas emissions globally by 50% by the year 2050. Compared to its previous declaration in Bali during the UN Summit on Climate Change in December last year, 25-40% from the 1990 levels by the year 2020 had been agreed. The G8 declaration, according to some delegates, does not constitute an advance but a step backward in the global community's ability to deal with climate change (G8 Action Network, 2008).

African Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu has made an urgent appeal calling on ordinary people in rich countries

‘to act as global citizens, not as isolated consumers. We must listen to our consciences, and not to governments who speak only about economic markets. These markets will cease to exist if climate change is allowed to develop to climate chaos... This is a message to people everywhere who challenge the causes of poverty around the world. Climate change is for real. As I speak, famine is increasing; flooding is increasing, as is disease and insecurity globally because of water scarcity.’ The reality is that the world's poor will be the worst hit by climate change. This is a global justice issue...’It is the countries which are least responsible for causing climate change that are paying the heaviest price’ (G8 Action Network, 2008).

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<sup>2</sup> G8 comprises of Russia, USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, Italy and France.

The G8, as we remember are the main proponents of globalization which is now wracking the globe in the form of simultaneous crises of skyrocketing oil prices, rising food prices, global financial collapse and worsening climate change. These changes in the international and national environments, including the impact of globalization process have contributed to the tensions, the violence and the conflicts that consume the world today. It must be acknowledged that the gaps between the rich and poor countries, between wealthy and destitute people have never been greater than today.

So what human rights violations are we talking about here?

The consequences of wars, of climate change, including the impact of globalization are direct threats and attacks not only to individuals, groups and communities – to peoples we care about in social work but they are attacks against humanity. The gravity and depth of the impacts of global conflicts confronting the world today go beyond the traditional violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights – the violation of our right to development, our right to peace! We could not even talk about our most fundamental right – the right to life, our right to dignity because in case of an extreme fit of madness, a nuclear war could exterminate and erase humankind from the earth and earth itself from the whole creation.

As social workers, we are witness to this madness as our profession deals primarily with the victims on a day-to-day basis. In many cases, social workers themselves become victims as we ourselves fall within the categories of those marginalized, disempowered, excluded, disadvantaged, discriminated or whatever name we give to those victimized in the process.

What can we do as social workers?

Ten years ago on July 17, 1988, 160 states gathered in Rome, Italy to draft the Rome Statute creating the International Criminal Court. More than 50 years after the idea came about, this historic event finally gave birth to the first permanent and independent international criminal court that will address the most heinous crimes – genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and once defined, the crime of aggression. It is considered a landmark in the history of international law and a major achievement of humankind in its struggle towards ending impunity and bringing forth an era of accountability.

William Pace, convenor of the NGO Coalition for the ICC, a network of almost 3,000 civil society organizations worldwide of which I am now involved, had declared during the adoption of the ICC treaty:

‘The international community has taken one of the most important steps in history toward one of the greatest of all human goals, the goal at the heart of the creation of the United Nations, ‘to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.’ Too much of history is the story of wars won and peace lost. Today peace won, and war has lost.’ (Pace, 2006)

From my own experience of working with political prisoners and victims of torture, enforced disappearances, summary killings, massacres, displacements of communities in the

Philippines, to networking among human rights and development groups in Asia and the Pacific region, in Africa, Latin America and other continents, to lobbying the UN, linking with Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other international NGOs and inter-governmental bodies, we have learned in the process that we are no longer doing these for our homeland and our people but for all of humanity, that we are not only doing these as social workers but as part of humanity.

The ICC provides just one of the many opportunities we social workers can work with victims. There are other ways besides the ICC. The Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic, for instance, was tried by a special UN-initiated International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. The UN Security Council also set up a special court to try the perpetrators of genocide in Rwanda. In Cambodia, another special court is now trying some of the leaders of the Khmer Rouge who are being held responsible for crimes against humanity when they were in power from 1975 to 1979. Similarly a special court has been set up in Timor Leste to try those responsible for the atrocities committed during their struggle for independence in 1998. A few weeks ago, we got the news that former Bosnian Serb President Radovan Karadzic, charged with genocide, extermination, murders, deportations and other crimes committed against Bosnian Muslims, Croats and other non-Serb civilians in Bosnia during the 1992-1995 war was arrested in Belgrade suburbs after 13 years of hiding. He was believed to be responsible for the deaths of 300,000 people and the displacement of 1.8 million who were forced to leave their homes. He is now facing trial before the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

In my own experience, I can say that social workers, wherever they are, are in a most privileged position to work in this field. We have a crucial contribution to change the path of globalization where its benefits are primarily enjoyed by the people. And this only becomes possible if their participation in changing its course is fully harnessed. Empowering people to become the main actors in their own development remains to be our foremost challenge as social workers and as a profession. An empowered people can bring their own voice to every possible venue where they can access and secure justice and create their own development.

At this point, I invite you to add your voice and your energy to your local social work group, to your national and regional associations, to the International Federation of Social Workers so we can truly make an impact not only on the lives of the individuals and groups we work with but with peoples and nations we share our common humanity.

Our call should be: **STOP THE WAR!**

**STOP THE WAR** because war is the antithesis of what social work is all about – to protect human life, unleash its full potential and to live in dignity. There can be no life if the concern is to kill and destroy.

**STOP THE WAR** because it is the most barbaric, most inhuman way of dealing with situations. It is **MADNESS!**

**STOP THE WAR** because it paralyzes progress and deprives people of their right to development. There is no way poverty can be eradicated in the context of war because it

siphons all of the world's human and material resources into the machinery of human and environmental destruction.

This appeal to stop the war had been made again and again. We all know the risks and what it takes to support such cause. But to me and to some other colleagues who have gone ahead of us in this struggle, this will be the greatest contribution we as social workers, we as a profession can contribute to humankind. Justice Robert Jackson, chief prosecutor of the Nuremberg tribunal had said:

‘The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant, and so devastating, that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated.’

Stopping the war may sound like an impossible dream. But indeed if we consistently struggle just like what our colleagues and the people of Latin America did to end dictatorships, what the People Power did in the Philippines, in Timor Leste and now what the people of Burma and others are struggling to end conflicts in their respective communities.

Before I end, I mentioned Burma. I have an elder sister, a social worker who actually inspired me to be a social worker instead of pursuing a career in law. She could have joined me in this trip to tell us the story of the Burmese people who had been struggling against the longest military rule not only in Southeast Asia but throughout the world. But she is right now in Burma responding to the urgent call for aid to the victims of a recent deadly cyclone that hit the central part of the country, killing more than 130,000 villagers and leaving millions homeless. The disaster was a tragedy in itself. What could be more tragic than deliberately refusing aid to those most in need? The military junta that has illegally ruled the country for the past 20 years since 1988 did not allow aid and aid workers to enter the country, not until the UN Secretary General himself intervened to ask the junta to allow humanitarian workers to come in. The UN says up to 2.5 million cyclone survivors face hunger, homelessness and potential outbreaks of deadly diseases, especially in the low-lying delta. Aid has reached so far to only 25% of those affected. Recently, the military junta came out with a policy of requiring all aid agencies and tourists to exchange their money to the local currency which is 20 times the usual rate, making a huge business out of the humanitarian aid intended for its own people.

Some of us will remember last year, hundreds and thousands of Buddhist monks who were peacefully protesting against increasing fuel costs were killed and disappeared, tortured and imprisoned. And most of us know that Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's opposition leader, Nobel peace prize laureate, had been on house arrest for the past 18 years and hundreds of Burma's elected leaders and their supporters had been in prison for many years. Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy won the 1990 elections but the military imposed its own rule and embarked on a war against its own people. The rest is history of untold human sufferings and loss of dignity as people were denied their basic rights and were subjected to the worst forms of human rights violations including mass military rape of ethnic girls and women.



A campaign has been initiated by the Burmese groups to bring the military junta to justice before the International Criminal Court. It will require a referral from the UN Security Council to bring the case to the ICC as Burma is not a state party to the ICC treaty. There has been a growing consensus especially after the 2006 UN General Assembly of the World Summit Outcome which acknowledged among other things the concept of 'Responsibility to Protect', not only that lawless states are a threat to security, but also that the international community has a moral and legal responsibility to protect people held prisoners by their own leaders.

I appeal to you, on behalf of our Burmese brothers and sisters, to support this campaign. These are crimes against humanity and those responsible must be made to account for such heinous acts. The war must end. Impunity must be put to an end. Aung San Suu Kyi's message to us... "Please your freedom to promote ours."

Dear colleagues, let us continue to challenge ourselves and the profession that indeed, if I may use the theme we had in Munich two years ago, we as social workers can 'make a world of difference' as we address global conflicts and their root causes. Let us take real efforts to struggle together in solidarity. We owe humanity a world without wars, a world without fears. Let us truly commit ourselves to end the wars so that peoples of the world may live their lives in dignity and in peace. Let us do it with a sense of urgency as if 'such a journey to the future is a matter of life and death'.

Good day to you all and let us bring home the message and solidarity we have shared together in this conference.

Obrigada!

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