Building the Framework for The Right to Peace

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Address to Workshop on Draft UN Declaration

on the Right to Peace

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When Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield, in a live broadcast from his perch in the International Space Station circling Earth every ninety minutes, showed elementary school students how to tune a guitar in space, he demonstrated the magnificence of the moment we live in. He described for his young audience the beauty and unity of the systems that make up the planet, adding that it is hard to reconcile the beauty of the world as seen from space with the terrible things that people do to each other.

Looking at the planet as a whole, this blue ball spinning through the galaxies, is the place to start in considering a question that becomes starker with each passing year: is peace on earth possible? Do the continuing Syrian atrocities, the attack on the Boston Marathon, the perpetual Mideast enmities reveal that humanity must always fear the next outbreak of violence?

My message to this Workshop is that history is moving, however

laboriously, toward peace. We must be able to see beyond daily conflicts and grasp world trendlines. A new global civilization is emerging. The advances in science, medicine, technology, communications and travel have raised standards of living everywhere. A new middle class is rising in Asia. Sub-Saharan Africa is shaking off endemic poverty. The evidence of the decline of violence is piling up. Across the world, people want peace, not war. There has never been a more propitious time to move forward in establishing in law the right to peace. This is a time for us to build the framework for that right in renewed confidence.

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First, we must deal with the contradictions that confuse many people, not least the decision-makers in the political systems. Anxiety for our security is a hallmark of our age. Every day brings new accounts of violence, war, famine, ecological disaster and political turmoil. When I tell my friends that the trendline of physical violence across the world is actually going down, they look at me querulously. People are inundated with ghastly images of brutality brought to them in their living rooms by round-the-clock reporting of conflicts. But it is the scale of the reporting that has intensified, not the acts of violence themselves.

It is estimated that about 100 million people were killed in all the wars of the 20th century. Today, there are virtually no wars between states. In the first decade of this century, 131 warlords, dictators and the like who had caused mass carnage were convicted of crimes against humanity in tribunals that never existed before. Fewer people today are arbitrarily killed and

tortured by their own government, there are fewer civil wars and they tend to be shorter.

UN Peacekeeping, deploying more than 100,000 troops on 15 missions, is at an all-time high. In the last 15 years, the Landmines Treaty has saved countless lives. A new Arms Trade Treaty, though far from perfect, will now regulate the $70 billion annual arms business. World military expenditures slightly decreased last year. Three-quarters of the nations of the world have voted at the UN for the commencement of negotiations to ban all nuclear weapons.

I am not jumping to the conclusion that wars have ended and the world is guaranteed peace from now on. The world is still spending $1.7 trillion a year on arms, and the continued existence of 18,000 nuclear weapons with the power to cause unimaginable catastrophes are sobering reminders of the precariousness of the concept of peace. But it would be irresponsible to close our eyes to the effects of the programs to build peace that are found around the world.

Consider some of the places whose very names conjure up the spectre of genocide and mass human suffering in the recent past: Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia, Hiroshima, Northern Ireland. In the small East African nation of Rwanda, where about 800,000 people were killed over the span of a hundred days in 1994, commerce is beginning to thrive in a stable atmosphere. In Bosnia, thousands of Muslims were massacred in the worst crime on European soil since World War II, and now the Muslims and Serbs live in a fragile peace. In Cambodia, where two million people died in the "killing fields," the international community mounted an effective restoration

program, and the country has become a tourist centre of South Asia. In Hiroshima, where the first atomic bomb killed 140,000 people, the rebuilt vigorous city is a centre of the anti-nuclear weapons campaign. In Northern Ireland, "the Troubles" – the fierce and violent clashes between Catholics and Protestants in which 3,500 people were slain – had been seen as one of the world's intractable conflicts, but today the people live basically in peace.

The list of war-torn places that have given way to processes of peace and reconciliation is long: Angola, Ivory Coast, Mozambique, Guatemala, El Salvador, Timor Leste, Sierre Leone. All of these places have stories of progress to tell in building the conditions for peace. New mechanisms to improve peace keeping, peace-building and international justice, many under United Nations auspices, are laboriously being built. This creativity goes largely unreported (in the news business, "if it bleeds, it leads!") and people are unaware of the great strides being made in changing the old culture of war into a culture of peace. Despite the headlines, a new dynamic for peace exists in the world. As former US President Bill Clinton noted: "In places once synonymous with conflict, like the Balkans and Rwanda, former antagonists are now working together to solve problems."

We agonize over the 70,000 deaths so far in the Syrian conflict and criticize the decades-long Israel-Palestine impasse. Zones of conflict and the seeming inability of the international community to bring combatants everywhere to the peace table preoccupy us. But we must not lose sight that the world as a whole – huge areas of Africa, Asia and Latin America -- is entering the most hopeful state of peace in human history. There is no better example of how the world is moving from war to peace than Europe, which suffered through two World Wars in the 20th century and now basks in the

glow of the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union.

Around the world, we see the beginnings of a new culture of peace based on the universal values of life, liberty, justice, solidarity, tolerance, human rights, and equality between men and women. Countless civil society organizations are working on this, and they gain strength by instant communications with one another. Of course, there are fallbacks to war, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, because the major powers that occupy the permanent seats of the Security Council are still divided on how to exercise their responsibilities to protect the most vulnerable peoples. We are kept on edge by drone attacks and cyberwar as new means of warfare. The threat of nuclear terrorism and the military-industrial complex's incessant demand for more military spending distract us from abolishing nuclear weapons.

Despite all this, increasingly, humanity is breaking free from the old bonds of the culture of war. There are many failures in building a culture of peace, but that ought not to obscure our vision of where humanity is heading in the 21st century. Humanity is gradually learning that war is futile. That is an enormous gain in the struggle for peace. But it is not enough. We still have to deepen our understanding that development, peace, security and human rights are all inter-linked and mutually reinforcing. They are the foundations for collective security and well-being. We must increase our respect and understanding for religious and cultural diversity throughout the world. The agenda for peace is well established: preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping.

Although the United Nations is the world's premier international peacebuilding organization, the major powers still selfishly and short-

sightedly under-fund and under-empower it. Governments spend twice as much per day on armaments as the entire UN regular budget for a year. Nonetheless, the UN is steering the way to more human security through a remarkable range of activities ranging from treaties protecting children, women and vulnerable peoples to refugee assistance and fostering reconciliation processes. New thinking for the protection and development of the human community is taking form. It is a moment of astonishing change in the history of the world. The Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, the marches against war are only the opening notes. Humanity is discovering a power it never had before to construct a more peaceful world.

It is time for people to stop doubting their own capacity to effect change, time to stop being misinformed by a mainline media that is missing the real story of the creativity of our era, time to stop being passive in the determination of our own fate on earth.

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This Workshop is premised on the belief – which the UN has affirmed – that the peoples of the world have a sacred right to peace. We must insist on this truth and let no one dissuade us from it by the false claims of "impracticality." Nothing is more practical. Gandhi showed the power of non-violent resistance to social injustice. The time has come to resist the greatest injustice – the institution of war. For war by weapons of mass destruction will kill us all. The only way humanity can survive is by overcoming the culture of war, which has brought us to the unacceptable state of now being the authors of our own destruction.

If, in previous times, it could be said that humanity did not possess the tools of peace but only the tools of war, that condition no longer exists. The UN gives us the basis of international law to resolve human conflict. We have not yet reached sufficient maturity of civilization to enforce the right to peace. Governments, at least some of them, are still too strong and are able to overcome the wishes of those who have turned against war. But this situation will not prevail forever. It will give way to those who demand the right to peace, just as the forces of slavery, colonialism and apartheid gave way when the opposition became strong enough. That is why developing the elements of a culture of peace – education, sustainable development, respect for all human rights, equality between men and women, democratic participation, understanding and tolerance, free flow of information, and human security for all – is so important.

A culture of peace will not only make the world a more human place, it will inexorably lead to the acquisition of the right to peace. A system of global governance for the common good of humanity must be our goal. Future generations, when they have tasted the fruit of a culture of peace, will recognize almost intuitively that peace is their right. They will demand it. Our role, in setting the 21st century agenda, is to nourish the seeds of peace so that the blossom appears.