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The Human Right to Peace:

Ethics and Policy

By Senator Douglas Roche, O.C.

Address to 4th World Summit of Nobel Peace Laureates

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So overpowering is the culture of war that it discourages many from even thinking that they could be instruments of change. A cynicism and mistrust are deeply imbedded in populaces. Many who do speak up for change are dismissed as idealists. Yet despite a political and societal climate that supports the entrenched culture of war status quo, there are significant signs that "a culture of peace" is being born. Already the ideas and formulation of a culture of peace have taken shape and been given a structural basis. A culture of peace may still be a goal rather than the dominant reality, but, just as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King's principles of non-violence were taken up by many, so too the programs for a culture of peace are slowly taking shape.

A New Vision of Peace

UNESCO has formulated a culture of peace as a set of ethical and aesthetic values, habits and customs, attitudes toward others, forms of behaviour and ways of life that draw on and express:

- Respect for life and for the dignity and human rights of individuals.
- Rejection of violence.

- Recognition of equal rights for men and women.

- Upholding of the principles of democracy, freedom, justice, solidarity, tolerance, the acceptance of differences, and

- understanding between nations and countries and between ethnic, religious, cultural and social groups.

A culture of peace is an approach to life that seeks to transform the cultural roots of war and violence into a culture where dialogue, respect, and fairness govern social relations. In this way, violence can be prevented through a more tolerant common global ethic. The culture of peace uses education as an essential tool in fostering attitudes supportive of nonviolence, cooperation and social justice. It promotes sustainable development for all, free human rights, and equality between men and women. It requires genuine democracy and the free flow of information. It leads to disarmament.

The culture of peace is, at its core, an ethical approach to life. It recognizes that the world is experiencing a fundamental crisis. Though this crisis is often expressed in economic, ecological or political terms, it is fundamentally a crisis of the human spirit. It is a crisis of all humanity which, in the journey through time, has reached the point where we are capable of destroying all life on earth just at the moment when the

recognition of the inherent human rights of everyone is beginning to take hold. A choice in how we will live, which path we will follow, is illuminated. The culture of peace offers the vision of a global ethic toward life in full vibrancy; the culture of war offers the prospect of misery and annihilation.

When he was UNESCO Secretary-General, Federico Mayor dedicated himself to three initiatives to develop a culture of peace: a proposal for an International Year for the Culture of Peace (2000); a proposal for a U.N. Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace; and an initiative of the Nobel Peace Laureates' "Campaign for the Children of the World" that would eventually become the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World (2001-10).

The centerpiece of this work is the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace adopted by the U.N. General Assembly September 13, 1999. It is perhaps the most comprehensive programme for peace ever taken up by the United Nations.

The Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace followed and defined eight areas of action:

- Education;
- Sustainable economic and social development;

- Respect for all human rights;

- Equality between women and men;

- Democratic participation;

- Understanding, tolerance and solidarity;

- Participatory communication and the free flow of information and knowledge;

- International peace and security.

U.N. Secretary-General Annan pointed out that, while each of these areas of action have long been U.N. priorities, "what is new is their linkage through the culture of peace and non-violence into a single coherent concept … so that the sum of their complementarities and synergies can be developed."

Implementing such an extensive Programme of Action is a long-term challenge. This is why the U.N. called for partnerships to develop among various actors (governments, civil society and the U.N. system) towards "a global movement for a culture of peace." The Programme would be aimed at not only the 2000 International Year for the Culture of Peace but at the decade that followed. Nobel Peace Prize Laureates performed a great service when they drafted Manifesto 2000, translated into more than 50 languages, to act as a guideline for public awareness campaigns:

- **Respect all life**: Respect the life and dignity of each human being without discrimination or prejudice;

- **Reject violence**: Practice active non-violence, rejecting violence in all its forms: physical, sexual, psychological, economical and social, in particular towards the most deprived and vulnerable such as children and adolescents;

- **Share with others**: Share my time and material resources in a spirit of generosity to put an end to exclusion, injustice and political and economic oppression;

- **Listen to understand**: Defend freedom of expression and cultural diversity, giving preference always to dialogue and listening without engaging in fanaticism, defamation and the rejection of others;

- **Preserve the planet**: Promote consumer behaviour that is responsible and development practices that respect all forms of life and preserve the balance of nature on the planet;

- **Rediscover solidarity**: Contribute to the development of my community, with the full participation of women and respect for democratic principles, in order to create together new forms of solidarity.

The Effect of September 11

The culture of peace should not be considered the technical solution to every world problem; rather it supplies the moral foundation for a better individual and global order, a vision which can lead people away from

despair and society away from chaos. However, just as the Programme was starting, chaos struck in the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

Since September 11, a deep sense of fear has pervaded the general populace. We have been violently attacked. We have been told that we do not know where the next attack is coming from. *We must be ready. We must prepare ourselves for this new kind of aggression. If preemptive attacks are necessary, so be it. War against this unseen enemy must be fought*. Media relentlessly feed us images of destruction and ceaselessly convey the message that the military's might is now necessary to protect us. The culture of war was given a great gift by the terrorists of September 11. If you want peace, the Romans said, prepare for war. The terrorists have apparently confirmed this.

In this environment, the culture of peace can hardly be heard let alone obtain the political attention and government funding to make an impression on electorates. In addition to being fearful, many are cynical about peace ever being achieved in such a turbulent world. The arms manufacturers, who mount such powerful lobbies in the legislative halls of Western countries, discount the elements of peace as so much naiveté. To challenge militarist thinking is to run the risk of being considered unpatriotic. The fences enclosing creative thinking are indeed high.

But the machinery of war has not in the past built the kind of world in which people everywhere can achieve human security. Why can it be expected to do so in the new conditions? Rather, it is the slow, painstaking construction of a new culture of peace that offers hope for a better future. The values of such a culture are well worth the time it takes to develop them. The momentum of history, buttressed by new life enhancing technologies, is on the side of the culture of peace.

The Human Right to Peace

The culture of peace prepares the way for greater understanding of the human right to peace. Indeed, the work already accomplished in the United Nations system to develop the concept of the human right to peace is one of the world's best kept secrets. The culture of war so pervades public opinion that it has drowned out voices asserting that the human right to peace is a fundamental right of every human being and is, in fact, the major precondition for all human rights. The time has come to emphasize that the peoples of the world have a sacred right to peace.

The subject of the human right to peace has clearly entered circles of discussion at the U.N. Some hold that it is already a component of developing international law. This is a signal moment because a full

discussion of the right to peace puts a new spotlight on the age-old question of the abolition of war itself. In the new era of weapons of mass destruction, the viability of war as a legal means to resolve disputes is clearly over. War today can lead to the obliteration of humanity. Unfortunately, the world community, held in check by the forces of the culture of war, is a long way from outlawing war. The debate on the human right to peace, therefore, is a step forward. As it is pursued, it will force the political system to face up to its responsibility to at least avoid war.

The debate inevitably will centre on the deeply controversial question of the future of nuclear weapons. The International Court of Justice has already given its view on this matter: it says nations have a legal obligation to get rid of them. While the abolition of nuclear weapons will not by itself guarantee peace, it is an elementary fact of the 21st century that as long as nations brandish nuclear weapons there can be no peace.

The proponents of nuclear weapons do indeed know which way the debate on the human right to peace is headed. That is why they will use every argument they can think of, every political device they can find, and every form of intimidation they can invent to derail the debate. They derailed the debate in UNESCO. They have rendered nuclear weapons abolition resolutions at the U.N. inoperative. They have used the tragedy of

September 11 to scare the populace into believing that only gigantic amounts of weaponry can head off the terrorism of the future. They have already caused an erosion of civil liberties in the guise of combating terrorism.

These proponents of militarism as the route to peace appear to operate today from the commanding heights of public opinion. But against this insidious thinking that war equals peace is rising a new army – not of soldiers but of highly informed, dedicated, and courageous citizens of all countries who do see the perils ahead. There is a blossoming of both understanding and action in the new phenomenon of an alert civil society calling governments to account for paying only lip service to their human rights commitments. Buttressed by the dynamic means of electronic communication, they are bringing new energy to the global quest for peace.

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