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Kofi Annan's Vision for Promoting Human Rights in the 55th Session

Kofi Annan, the United Nations Secretary-General, entered the new millennium with a commitment to addressing identifiable and serious problems facing the global community. At the forefront of this "millennium movement" is Secretary-General Annan's goal of protecting and enhancing individual human rights. He stressed the idea that the United Nations Charter must be read today in the spirit with which it was intended — "protect individual human beings, not to protect those who abuse them" because "no legal principle — not even sovereignty — can ever shield crimes against humanity."¹ Secretary-General Annan stressed that the protection of human rights is contingent upon the international community's realization of lasting peace, progress and development through an overarching policy of conflict prevention.²

In his Millennium Report, the Secretary-General asked the global community to band together to prevent both internal and external conflicts and other societal catastrophes, all of which are often associated with human rights abuses.³ Such catastrophes include: (1) extreme poverty; (2) the rapid spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in poor countries; (3) discrimination against women; and (4) widespread racism. The desire to live in a world free from conflict, catastrophe, and discrimination was adamantly expressed in "Voices of the People," the world's largest ever public opinion survey, where, for example, fewer than one in ten the respondents from a particular region believed that their government adequately protected human rights.⁴ In his Millennium Report, Secretary-General Kofi Annan addresses the current state of the international community through an examination of several topical areas. He

¹ See Kofi A. Annan, *We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century* 7, G.A. Resolution 2000, U.N. GAOR, 54th Sess., U.N. Doc. A/54/2000 (2000), available at <http://www.un.org/millennium> [hereinafter "*Millennium Report*"]. See also Kofi Annan, *Two Concepts of Sovereignty*, THE ECONOMIST, 18 September 1999.

² See *Millennium Report*, *supra* note 1, at 43–53.

³ See, e.g., Kofi Annan, *Report of the Secretary-General*, G.A. Resolution 948, U.N. GAOR, 53rd Sess., U.N. Doc. A/53/948 (1999).

⁴ See *Millennium Report*, *supra* note 1, at 16 (providing a 1999 Gallup poll, entitled "Voices of the People," expressing the concerns of global citizens).

then suggests possible solutions. A few of these will be discussed here.

POVERTY

“Extreme poverty is an affront to our common humanity.”⁵ With this statement, Secretary-General Annan challenges the entire international community to address and correct this epidemic problem. In the past century, the world has made incredible, unprecedented economic gains; yet nearly half of the global population is still forced to live on less than two dollars a day. Even in the last decade, the disparity of income has continued growing and without a drastic change, there is no evidence of it slowing down.⁶

Poverty intensifies other problems faced by developing nations. For example, poor countries, especially those with differences amongst their ethnic and religious communities, are more susceptible to conflict than richer countries. Since most post-Cold War conflicts are internal, they create a need for humanitarian assistance. The world population has reached six billion people, and by the year 2025 we can expect an additional two billion, with a majority born in poor developing countries. With this in mind, the Secretary-General asked the Heads-of-State that gathered at the Millennium Summit to join him in a battle against poverty and to adopt a goal of decreasing the proportion of people living in extreme poverty in half by the year 2015. Secretary-General Annan further urged that no effort be spared to reach this goal.⁷

To achieve the goal of reducing poverty, Secretary-General Annan made numerous suggestions, which in turn would be advantageous to other pressing human rights issues. He first suggested that in order to reduce poverty each country must try to achieve sustained income growth, facilitated through employment opportunities for women. A major source of income inequality stems from gender discrimination in wages, property rights and education. The proportion of women now working in developing countries has undoubtedly risen: however, these jobs offer squalid working environments and extremely poor wages. Yet women accept these conditions as a result of the lack of alternatives. Decreasing income disparities will create opportunities that would allow women to

⁵ *Id* at 19.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id* at 20.

make informed choices in respect to their employment. The increase in female employment may allow women to delay marriage, and therefore, decrease fertility rates, as well as offering them better health care and a positive "social value."⁸

Such benefits to a woman's human rights in developing countries can only be achieved with proper country governance. "Good governance comprises the rule of law, effective state institutions, transparency and accountability in the management of public affairs, respect for human rights, and the participation of all citizens in the decisions that affect their lives."⁹

Second, Secretary-General Annan suggested education as a weapon against poverty. Not only is education key to the new global economy; it is also necessary for development, social progress, and human freedom. Even though education levels in developing countries have risen in the past decade, more than 130 million children of primary-school age, throughout the international community, are not attending a learning institution. Many of these children do not attend school because they are living in poverty and are needed to work to ensure the family's survival. Gender discrimination is a factor here — females constitute sixty percent of the children not enrolled in school. This is especially troubling due to the fact that studies have shown that investing in a female's education translates into better nutrition for families, better health care, poverty reduction and better overall economic performance. At the Millennium Summit, Secretary-General Annan, urged the members of the United Nations to try to reduce the gender gap in primary and secondary education by 2005 with the hope that by the year 2015 all children would have completed a primary education.¹⁰

HIV/AIDS EPIDEMIC

The HIV and AIDS epidemics are not problems developing countries face alone. These diseases are prevalent in every country, in every region, among all races and social classes. Over the past few decades, better health care, innovations in medicine and changing societal views surrounding these illnesses have dramatically increased life expectancy and decreased infant mortality, but not

⁸ *Id.* at 22.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ See *Millennium Report supra* note 1 at 24–25.

universally¹¹. There are now thirty-six million people worldwide living with HIV/AIDS and twenty-three million of them are in sub-Saharan Africa. It is estimated that by 2010 there will be 40 million orphans in the sub-Saharan mostly because of HIV/AIDS.¹²

Active government support is critical to the fight against HIV/AIDS. Many countries have remained silent on the issue of HIV/AIDS and, in the process, denied their citizens life saving information. This refusal to provide knowledge that is essential to informed decision-making is an affront to an individual's human rights. To counteract this trend, the United Nations created UNAIDS, an organization responsible for working with governments to develop and implement plans of action in the battle against the disease.

In his Millennium Report, the Secretary-General stressed the importance of providing health care information and condoms as preventative measures against the spread of HIV and AIDS. He urged those attending the Millennium Summit to adopt the goal of reducing the HIV infection rates in persons 15 to 24 years of age by 25% in the most infected countries by the year 2005, and 25% globally before 2010. He also recommended that governments set preventative goals and challenged developed countries to work with pharmaceutical industries and other partners to develop an effective and affordable vaccine against HIV.¹³ In order to effectuate Secretary-General Annan's goals, governments, the pharmaceutical industry, and international institutions must actively coordinate their efforts in the struggle against HIV/AIDS.

CONFLICT

Internal and external conflicts act as weapons of mass destruction and are antithetical to human dignity. The Secretary-General has often stated that to prevent violations of human rights, such conflicts must be prevented. Since poorer countries have fewer economic and political resources with which to manage these con-

¹¹ In Botswana, the average child born today can expect to live an average of 41 years. Prior to the spread of AIDs, that life expectancy would have been 70 years.

¹² See *Millennium Report supra* note 1 at 26. See generally UNAIDS, *AIDS Epidemic Update: December 2000*, available at http://unaids.org/wac/2000/wad00/files/WAD_epidemic_report.PDF.

¹³ See *Millennium Report, supra* note 1 at 27-28.

flicts, reducing poverty can provide a means to decrease their occurrence. Secretary-General Annan has stressed that a primary way to strengthen protection and prevent conflicts is to reassert the centrality of international humanitarian and human rights law. Essential to the enforcement of human rights laws was the establishment of the International Criminal Court and strengthened humanitarian monitoring departments.¹⁴

Many criticize the idea of "humanitarian intervention" and believe that internal affairs should be left to the sovereign states. In response, the Secretary-General stresses that if the international community chooses sovereignty over humanitarian intervention, the UN will face a dilemma over how it can confront and resolve unattended and gross violations of human rights. In what has been called the "Annan Doctrine,"¹⁵ the Secretary-General places individuals at the core of international human rights law and expresses his view that sovereignty extends to individuals as well as to states. He, in turn, defines sovereignty as "the fundamental freedom of each individual, enshrined in the Charter of the UN and subsequent international treaties."¹⁶

This past year, the Secretary-General launched an appeal in response to nineteen humanitarian crises, calling for the international community to provide US\$2.26 billion in contributions to sustain the lives of thirty-five million people during the course of 2001.¹⁷ He explained that the consequences of conflict and natural disasters, such as statelessness and internal displacement, continue to plague countless civilians worldwide. Victims of these crises have lost access to health care, food and other essential means of survival. Secretary-General Annan stated that these situations force people to look to the international community for help and for assurances that they and their children will have a secure future.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Millennium Report*, *supra* note 1, at 43, 46.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Human Right Watch, *World Report 2000*, available at <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k/>.

¹⁶ See *Millennium Report*, *supra* note 1 at 48.

¹⁷ See Kofi Annan, Address for Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeals, reprinted in *35 Million Urgently Need Humanitarian Assistance* (28 November 2000), S.G. Press Release, U.N. Doc. SG/SM/7644 (28 November 2000).

¹⁸ *Secretary-General launches humanitarian appeals for 2001, calling on international community to provide urgent support to 35 million*, available at <http://www.reliefweb.int/appeals/2001/pressrel.html>.

RACISM

Racism remains one of the most insidious problems facing the international community. To deal with this ever increasing problem, the United Nations has scheduled the World Conference Against Racism, to take place 21 August 2001–7 September 2001, in Durban, South Africa. The Conference will look into education, ethnic conflicts, human rights abuses, gender issues and the struggle for democracy. A number of regional conferences have been planned or have taken place leading up to the Durban Conference. A prominent example was the African regional conference, which was held in Dakar, Senegal on 24 January 2001. It recommended establishing international mechanisms to deal with the follow-up and monitoring of racism-related issues.¹⁹ High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson is looking forward to making a huge stride amongst the international community in the war against racism.²⁰

TREATIES

On 15 May 2000, Secretary-General Annan invited all Heads-of-State participating in the Millennium Summit to consider signing, ratifying, or acceding to certain treaties, if their State had not already become a party to those instruments. These treaties include:

1. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide;
2. International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination;
3. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights;
4. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
5. Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;

¹⁹ See Draft: Declaration of the African Regional Preparatory Conference for the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, available at <http://www.africapolicy.org/docs01/wcar0101.htm>.

²⁰ Press Briefing By High Commissioner For Human Rights, 6 February 2001, available at, <http://www.un.org/News/briefing/docs/2001/robinson.htm>.

6. Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the Abolition of the Death Penalty;
7. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;
8. Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;
9. Convention against Torture, and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment;
10. Convention on the Rights of the Child;
11. Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on involvement of children in armed conflicts;
12. Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography;
13. International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.²¹

CONCLUSION

The Secretary-General is determined to make human rights a major concern of the international community during this, the 55th session of the United Nations. It is quite evident that many serious human rights violations that occur throughout the global community are triggered by underlying, deep-rooted political, economical or social problems. Hopefully, Heads-of-State will heed Secretary-General Annan's advice and begin implementing preventative measures domestically to eliminate these underlying problems, thereby securing human rights worldwide.

Madelyn Calabrese

²¹ Kofi A. Annan, *The Secretary-General's Letter To Heads Of State And Government*, May 15, 2000, available at, <http://www.untreaty.un.org/English/mil-lennium/law/sgletter.htm>.

