

# Q&A: “World Needs a Global Culture of Human Rights”

By Daisaku Ikeda

Interview with Daisaku Ikeda, President of Soka Gakkai International

**UNITED NATIONS, Mar 28 2008 (IPS)** - As the United Nations commemorates the 60th anniversary of its landmark Universal Declaration of Human Rights this year, the Tokyo-based Soka Gakkai International (SGI) has called for an international conference on human rights education.

A non-governmental organisation (NGO) with over 12 million members in some 190 countries, SGI says the proposed conference should be centred on civil society groups.

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda admits that traditionally human rights issues have been – and should be – addressed primarily by governments. “But efforts cannot stop there,” he said.

“Ultimately, we need to establish a global culture of human rights, one that is shared by all people and which is rooted in the realities of people’s daily lives,” said Ikeda, who is also a Buddhist philosopher, author and peace proponent.

Asked if his home country would support such a proposal, he said: “Yes, I would certainly hope that Japan and other governments would extend political support to such a conference. At the same time, I have high expectations for the role to be played by civil society.”

In an interview with IPS U.N. Bureau Chief Thalif Deen, Ikeda said that a number of governments have brought up the issue of human rights education before the Human Rights Council in Geneva and expressed interest in such a conference.

“While this kind of support is very welcome, I think it is important that the essential nature of the conference as a civil society initiative not be lost,” he added.

In his annual 2008 “peace proposals” released in January, Ikeda has also called for concrete international commitments on several global issues, including nuclear disarmament, de-militarisation, elimination of poverty and hunger, empowerment of youth, and the protection of the environment.

Excerpts from the interview follow.

IPS: Although the Cold War ended about 20 years ago, the world is still grappling with a growing number of conflicts within nations and between nations. Why has the international community, and particularly the United Nations, failed to bring lasting world peace?

DI: Obviously, the United Nations has its limitations, and there is much criticism of it. But the fact remains that the U.N. is the only standing forum for dialogue about global issues in which virtually all the countries on Earth participate. This is why I have always urged in my proposals that the U.N. be placed at the centre of efforts to construct a peaceful world. We must absolutely avoid repeating the tragedy of global war, such as occurred twice in the 20th century.

In such fields as refugee relief, conflict resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding, the U.N. has been the site of quiet and largely unrecognised efforts toward the creation of what might be called a global safety net. The loss of these functions would greatly increase the suffering of people around the world.

Some years back, when I met with then U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, we discussed the fact that, relative to the expectations and burdens placed on it, the U.N. receives only the most minimal support. In other words, the U.N. is not by nature a powerless institution. Rather, what is weak is the will of the international community to work through the U.N. to resolve problems. And this lack of will impacts the ability of the U.N. to function.

For my part, I have tried to contribute to creating a better, more stable environment for the U.N. by urging the various world leaders with whom I have met to offer the U.N. greater support. This is also the reason why my peace proposals highlight what the U.N. has achieved and suggest new ways for working through the U.N. system.

The members of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) have been cooperating with U.N. agencies and other NGOs to raise awareness on issues relating to disarmament and the environment and to promote an ethic of global citizenship. Our stance is not that of bystanders, watching to see whether the U.N. will succeed or fail. Rather, we want to focus on developing a deeper sense of responsibility – what can and should we do to enable the U.N. to function effectively?

Gandhi said that goodness travels at a snail's pace. Just lamenting the U.N.'s shortcomings or becoming cynical about the harsh realities of the world achieves nothing. What matters is the steady effort to build the kind of people's solidarity that will be a consistent source of support for the UN's activities. The accumulated experience and wisdom gained by many different countries and peoples working together through the U.N. is immensely valuable. I am convinced that, centuries from now, this will be seen as the greatest treasure our generation bequeathed to humanity.

IPS: How imperative is a dialogue among nations to end the increasing fanaticism and intolerance in the world today?

DI: It is impossible to contain, much less resolve, the threats posed by extremism and intolerance through hard power such as military force. On the other hand, just the willingness to talk, especially if it is limited to

one side, will not lead to an immediate solution. Life is not that simple. The fact is that there are cases where it seems that there is no dialogue partner, or that the burdens of the past make dialogue impossible.

But, however justified it may appear, resort to violence and force ultimately resolves nothing. The hatreds of one generation are reproduced in the next, and the conflict becomes more deeply entrenched and prolonged. Unless we can break these cycles of hatred and vengeance, the roots of violence will remain. I believe that, as challenging as this may be, persistent and courageous efforts at dialogue are the only way to overcome extremism and intolerance among peoples.

IPS: How confident are you that some, or most, of the objectives you spelled out in your peace proposals can be achieved in the next decade or during this generation?

DI: The second president of the Soka Gakkai, Josei Toda, who passed away 50 years ago this year, often said that his commitment was to eliminate “misery” from the human lexicon. I regard Mr. Toda as my mentor in life and the determination to realise his dream underlies my own efforts. These proposals are part of that work. There are hundreds of millions of people in the world who suffer from the impact of wars and conflict, poverty and hunger, environmental destruction. My proposals are based on the desire that such people will be empowered to transform and overcome the sufferings in their lives.

I am neither a politician nor a policy specialist. I am sure there is much lacking in my proposals. I continue to write and issue these proposals in my capacity as a private citizen in the hope that they will help deepen the debate on critically important issues and aid the search for a way out of our present quandary. And there are a number of ideas, such as the U.N. Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, that have been realised in cooperation with fellow NGOs and relevant U.N. agencies.

I have a very deep faith in the capacities of young people. I believe there is nothing young people cannot do – no reality they cannot change – if they set their minds to it. In writing these proposals, my greatest hope, my determination and commitment is to sow the seeds of change in young people's hearts.