

EXTREME POVERTY

The Gravest Violation of Human Rights

December 10 was Human Rights Day.

The most pressing human rights issue facing our world today is in my view poverty. Extreme poverty threatens people's right to life itself and makes impossible the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms essential to a humane way of life.

The fact is that nearly 24,000 people die *every day* because of extreme poverty and the resulting lack of access to nutrition, clean drinking water and basic medical care. The next hour will claim another 1,000 lives.

To make a stark comparison, this toll is the equivalent of a passenger jet carrying 500 people crashing every 30 minutes. And in this case, three out of four of the victim "passengers" are children age five or under.

In September 2000, the world's leaders gathered at the United Nations where they adopted a set of objectives later formalized as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The benchmarks to be realized by the year 2015 include reducing by half the number of people living on less than one dollar per day or suffering from hunger. Despite the solemn vows made at that time, at the current rate of progress even these goals will not be met.

Kemal Dervis, the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), warns forcefully of the high price of failing to reduce

poverty: “That would be a tragedy above all for the world’s poor—but rich countries would not be immune to the consequences of failure. In an interdependent world our shared prosperity and collective security depend critically on success in the war against poverty.”

In the shadow of those who live in affluence and comfort, consuming vast quantities of resources, untold numbers of Earth’s inhabitants are tormented by hunger, their dignity as human beings undermined. The role this terrible inequality plays in igniting chain reactions of hatred and violence must be acknowledged.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights clarifies this connection in its Preamble: “...disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind....”

The idea of interdependence is central to Buddhism, which holds that all things come into being through the mutual interactions of various causes and conditions.

No one can live entirely on their own, nor can any country or society exist in isolation. Buddhism illustrates this using the analogy of two bundles of reeds. Supporting each other, they will stand, but the collapse of one will bring both down.

It is crucial that we develop real awareness of ourselves as citizens of Earth, linked by mutual and indissoluble bonds. When we clearly recognize this reality and ground ourselves in it, we are compelled to take a strict accounting of our way of life.

It could in fact be said that all those whose lives and dignity continue to be

threatened by the unaddressed issues of poverty are victims of the “violence of apathy” on the part of the international community. To fail to take action even with clear knowledge of such suffering can only be called cowardice.

We must recall the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: “Justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

There is hope. There are prescriptions for action. Many NGOs, organizations and people of goodwill are engaged in the battle against poverty. Microcredit—small loans made to support grassroots enterprises—has been successfully championed by Muhammad Yunus, this year’s Nobel Peace Laureate. Such efforts have opened the way for large numbers of people to lift themselves out of poverty. They offer important new models for action.

The fact remains, however, that societies in the poorest regions of Earth are so exhausted that the initial rungs of the development ladder will remain permanently out of reach without assistance from the international community. The response requires the creative and carefully thought-through action of government agencies mobilizing resources on the scale to which only they have access, working in partnership with UN agencies and local government and nongovernmental organizations.

According to UNDP, the cost of eliminating poverty worldwide would be less than 1% of global income. In contrast, military expenditures worldwide now stand at 1 trillion dollars. By redressing these kinds of grotesque imbalances, we will start to meet the real security needs of the human family.

Aid to poor countries is not something to be undertaken out of pity. These are women and men, people young and old, who retain their pride as individuals struggling powerfully to live amid the most difficult circumstances imaginable.

That they are forced to live in fear and insecurity is a violation of their fundamental human rights.

As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services...”

The second Secretary-General of the UN, Dag Hammarskjöld, put it this way: “‘Freedom from fear’ could be said to sum up the whole philosophy of human rights.”

The processes of economic globalization have further deepened the inseparable bonds linking our daily lives with the rest of the world. This both requires us to reconsider our daily lives against the backdrop of this larger context, and provides us greater opportunities for doing so. What is the influence and impact of our actions on people in distant countries? Is there nothing we can learn from others’ ways of living? Thinking in this way, we come to realize that there is much that we each as individuals can do toward resolving the crisis of poverty.

Human history has long awaited the time when the energy of new hope and creativity will arise from among the most downtrodden and oppressed. When people who have experienced such abuses become empowered and take their place at the heart of international society, and their welfare becomes the focus of new ideas and new thinking, our world will be immeasurably enriched—both materially and spiritually.