

Against the Odds:
The Process of Reconciliation
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Opening Comments

Ladies and gentlemen of the United Nations, NGO delegates from around the world, colleagues, and friends: Good morning! My name is Carol Rittner and I am the moderator for this morning's plenary session, "Against the Odds: The Process of Reconciliation."

A few weeks ago, I participated in an NGO conference in Derry, Northern Ireland, a conference that had as its focus the topic, "Peace is Tough." As the conference organizers said, "Everyone knows that war is difficult, [but] we have an expectation that when the difficulty of war is over, life will be so much easier than it was during the conflict." Surely, there is much truth in that statement. Everyone of us here, no doubt,

would rather live our lives in an environment of peace rather than in a situation of conflict, but it has to be admitted that that while war and conflict is tough, peace after war and conflict has its own set of difficulties. What do I mean? Well,

Peace is particularly difficult for those who have lost loved ones during [a] conflict; it is tough for those who have been left wounded and maimed; it is tough for those who have given many years of their lives in pursuit of one of the many sides of the conflict and who now question the worth of that sacrifice. It is difficult for those who believe the issues remain unresolved and feel that it is necessary to continue the fight. It is also tough for most "ordinary" people who just want to get on with the business of living as full a life as possible and who are frustrated by the continuing arguments and wrangling and uncertainties of peace building.

Yes, peace **is** tough. It is **tough** for the reasons I have just mentioned, but it is **tough** for many other reasons as well, including the fact that in societies emerging from conflict, people are vulnerable — vulnerable because of the need to challenge their own certainties , and vulnerable because reconciliation is not easy.

Reconciliation takes time and hard work. It requires people of different ethnicities, political persuasions, and economic standing to move toward one another in a common commitment to a future characterized by inclusivity, tolerance, and co-operation. This is not easy, given past memories, present realities, and future fears that undermine the kind of trust building, risk-taking, and creative partnership that is required for viable

reconciliation to be possible. As the South African Nobel Peace Laureate, Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said more than once, "Reconciliation is not about being cozy; it is not about pretending that things were other than they were." What then is it?

This is not an easy question to answer, but this much I can say: "Reconciliation is more than the coexistence of formerly hostile groups living near each other. It is more than formerly hostile groups interacting and working together . . . Reconciliation means coming to accept one another and developing mutual trust. . . Reconciliation requires that victims and perpetrators come to accept the past and not see it so much as defining the future as simply a continuation of the past, [but] that they come to see the humanity of one another, accept each other, and see the possibility of a constructive relationship." If peace after conflict is tough, reconciliation is more than tough — it goes "against the odds." What does this mean?

I, myself, am not a survivor of conflict, much less a survivor of genocide or genocidal violence, so I am unable to speak with the authority of experience, but I have met and worked with many people who are survivors of conflict — from Northern Ireland, for example, and I have met and worked with survivors of genocide, including a woman by the name of Esther Mujawayo [Keiner}, who survived the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, a genocide that lasted 100 days, consumed the lives of more than 800,000 people, and that was broadcast live on BBC and CNN every day of its agonizing duration. Esther Mujawayo survived a genocide that happened in the heart of Africa, in a tiny country of no strategic or economic or, it seemed, **even human importance** to the inhabitants of Europe, the Americas, Australia, Asia, or any other place in the world. That she survived, and her three children with her, is nothing short of a miracle. "Everybody is gone," she told me, "nearly my whole family. My husband was killed, my father, my mother, my sister with her family — everybody. I was left." But,

horrible as that was, it wasn't even the worst of it. "The people who killed my family," Esther told me, "were not foreigners. They were neighbors. They were people with whom I had been to school, people with whom I had always been living. And the way they killed people — it was a blessing if you were shot. Only those who could afford to pay were shot. As for the others, they were killed in the most atrocious way, as if people were competing to do the worst they could do. It was not only the family I lost," she said. "That was difficult enough. What I really found difficult to lose was trust in human beings."

This morning, we shall heard from a variety of speakers, most of whom, unlike myself, can speak with the authority of experience, as well as the authority of expertise. In their presentations, they shall address some of the difficult issues and challenges facing civilian populations that have been traumatized by unspeakable violence, cruelty, and loss. Women and children — like Esther Mujawayo and her three children, for example — are victims of the new warfare that targets civilian populations. What are the social issues facing societies emerging from conflict? How can we help child soldiers and children traumatized by war and psycho-social disorders, including post traumatic stress? Are there therapies that can be devised to treat entire communities? How is terror and destruction overcome — not abstractly, in "society," but concretely, in real, live, hurting, angry, confused, revenge-seeking human beings?

Let me, for a moment, raise another issue, one I deliberately passed over, and it is that "Reconciliation means coming to accept another and developing mutual trust." What I did not say was that doing so "requires forgiving."

If peace is tough, and reconciliation is tough, what about "forgiving?" The very idea of it can be offensive to victims after horrible events like the Holocaust, the genocide in Rwanda, or the conflicts in Northern Ireland and Israel-Palestine, not to mention

a whole host of other places around the world. Even to people outside the victim group, the idea of forgiveness can be an affront, inconceivable and incomprehensible. How can anyone forgive the perpetrators of such horrors? Still, forgiving is necessary and desirable. "It paves the way for reconciliation and furthers healing, thereby making a better future possible."

In forgiving, people are not being asked to forget. On the contrary, it is important to remember so that we should not let such atrocities happen again. Forgiveness means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his or her own coin, but it is a loss that liberates the victim. Forgiveness lifts the burden of anger and desire for revenge. To again quote Archbishop Tutu, a man who speaks with the authority of experience, there is "no future without forgiveness" — and make no mistake: reconciliation is about the future. "Reconciliation based on falsehood, on not facing up to reality, is not true reconciliation, and will not last."

Reconciliation involves facing the truth about the past. It must simultaneously find a way — or ways — to deal realistically with the heritage of the past, compassionately with the victims, and justly with perpetrators in such a way as to benefit the well-being of society as a whole. Most will agree on the ideal outcome of this quest, the pertinent question is how *to get there*. **[End]**

Introduce Each Panelist before He/She Speaks

After Panel Presentations and Q & A:

I do not know if Esther Mujawayo [Keiner], my friend from Rwanda, would agree with what has been said during this seminar about reconciliation, but this much I do know: She would agree with the United Nations organizers of this conference session about the importance of focusing our attention on the difficulties involved in reconciliation. She also would agree, I think, that the

process of reconciliation is "Against the Odds" — of success! And yet, I think she also would affirm that the tasks facing us as human beings — finding ways to restore human dignity, to rebuild mutual trust among human beings, and to make possible the reconciliation of human beings in societies emerging from conflict — are tasks we must successfully accomplish. As Esther Mujawayo [Keiner] also said, "We have to act as if human beings are human beings — our future depends on it."