

12 November 2008

**Statement of Mr. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann,
President of the 63rd Session of the General Assembly,
at the opening of the debate on Agenda Item 45: Culture of peace**

Your Majesties,
Heads of State and Government,
Distinguished Ministers,
Distinguished Delegates,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Brothers and Sisters,

Our world is experiencing an extremely difficult period, the worst since the founding of the United Nations. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the future of humankind depends on our ability and willingness to take advantage of the lessons and opportunities presented by today's multiple and interrelated crises. It is a time of numerous bankruptcies, but the worst is the moral bankruptcy of humankind's self-proclaimed "more advanced societies", which has spread throughout the world. It is not only Wall Street that needs to be bailed out. We need to bail out all of humankind from its social insensitivity. From now on, solidarity must guide and direct all human activity. In other words, morals and ethics must be given the central place they should occupy in our lives.

Based on scientific evidence, we are now aware of the accelerating destruction of the life-sustaining capability of Earth and the real possibility of the disappearance of the human species. Both are attributable to irresponsible human behavior and to the unbridled greed and irrational consumerism that characterize developed societies. We must choose between allowing these values to dominate our societies or taking the necessary steps to ensure that solidarity and social responsibility become the guiding principles of human activity, including in the economic and political spheres.

In the inaugural address I delivered two months ago, I attributed this critical state of affairs in our world to what I called "insane and suicidal selfishness". But I also said then that this crisis could and should be turned into an opportunity to take the kind of courageous actions that are needed to ensure new levels of cooperation between humans and between people and nature, and thereby ensure a better world for present and future generations.

One of the most burning problems that we face today is the shameful reality that, despite the fact that we have the knowledge and the financial and technological resources to prevent it, half of the human population subsists at levels of hunger, malnutrition and poverty that are wholly incompatible with their inherent dignity and rights. This is not only shameful, it is, to use religious terminology, downright sinful.

We are all aware of this shameful reality. We also know that we have the means to do something about it. What is obviously lacking is the political will to move from a rhetorical acknowledgment of this reality to concrete, sustained and coordinated action at the local and global levels. Allow me, in a moment, to propose some ways to apply our values to concrete actions.

Great spiritual and moral strength is necessary for the kinds of actions that are required. And that is precisely why we have gathered here today: to join forces, as people of faith and/or of deep ethical convictions, to tap into our vast reserves of moral strength and awaken from our indifference to the fate of others. The United Nations has very appropriately elaborated a complex agenda for making the world a better place. But progress is too slow. We are running out of time, and do not seem to have the energy and conviction required to move any faster. We must not hesitate to draw on the moral force of our values of faith and ethical convictions to today's challenges.

Excellencies, before going any further, let me say that I feel very privileged to be presiding over this meeting, the purpose of which is to use our values that are based on faith and deeply held ethical convictions to seek solutions to the most burning issues of our time and which are reflected in the agenda of this General Assembly. I would be remiss if I did not likewise acknowledge the profound gratitude I feel for our brother, King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia, custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, for calling to our attention the need to hold this meeting. There is absolutely nothing more important at this time in the odyssey of human experience than to place our faith-based values and ethical convictions at centre stage in our efforts to cope with the convergence of crises that we are now facing on a global scale.

In order for this two-day session of the General Assembly to achieve the hoped for results, we must make it absolutely clear that we are not gathered here to talk about religion or theology. This would not be the appropriate forum for such discourse. We are here today to pledge to place our reserves of moral strength at the service of the goals of the United Nations. A similar exercise was undertaken 63 years ago and the outcome was one of the most glorious achievements of humankind - the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Today, confronted with the many problems that beset humankind, it is more than ever necessary to summon up these same ethical and moral values in order to move from declarations to actions that respond effectively to the numerous problems of our time. Making declarations is fine, but the time has come for action, for us to demonstrate that we believe in our declarations.

We know that nothing short of heroic decisions and actions can awaken us from our moral coma.

Although social responsibility is a basic law in each of the world's religions and in all ethical and philosophical traditions, we have allowed ourselves to become contaminated by the spirit of selfishness and individualism, which are the principal values, or rather, anti-values of the globally dominant culture.

This culture declares ethics and morals off limits to economic and political activity. It claims that "the business of business is business" and that the concepts of justice and fairness have no place within it.

The principles of justice, mercy and compassion are not applicable to economic activities and are deemed to be completely irrelevant.

Unbridled greed and social irresponsibility have thus become the main driving force of the dominant culture. The result is that we have been turned into veritable moral invalids.

This is the reason why wealthy nations have not been able to muster the political will to comply with even the minimal commitment to give 0.7 % of their GDP to help eradicate hunger and poverty from the world.

In order to stop polluting the environment, to stop being the irresponsible predators of nature that we have become, to love all of our brothers and sisters without exemption or exclusion, we urgently need to return to the values that are based on our faith and on our ethical-philosophical traditions.

We have openly rebelled against our mission to act as stewards of creation and have arrogantly declared ourselves its proprietors, arrogating to ourselves the right to squander and abuse the marvels of nature. By being thus unfaithful to our most sacred values and principles, we have also endangered not only the survival of our own species but also the very capacity of the Earth to sustain life.

In spite of all our current difficulties, our Earth is fortunate to have been blessed with the presence of a host of great spiritual prophets, saints and sages, who have offered their values to human society over the millennia. This divine wisdom or faith-based values are embodied in texts such as the Torah, the Bible, the Qu'ran and the Vedas, in the noble teachings of the Buddha, Lao Tzu and Confucius and in the wonderful beliefs and values of the indigenous peoples of all the continents of our Earth. The great spiritual values espoused in these teachings can be seen as constituting the “spiritual assets” of humankind. Today, we have gathered to acknowledge these values and to recommit ourselves to respecting them.

Without the inclusion of these spiritual assets, not even the best-planned programmes for the eradication of hunger and poverty in the world and for the attainment of peace on Earth can succeed. We need the inner strength—the moral energy and inspiration that we can get from our ethical values—to overcome our selfishness and individualism.

We have these powerful spiritual assets at our disposal. Unfortunately, we have opted to put them aside and decided instead to worship greed and we are now beginning to suffer the consequences of this infidelity to our deepest held beliefs and convictions.

The good thing is that we have an opportunity to integrate these values into the work of the United Nations, which can instill in us the moral strength and conviction that we need to take action that is capable of ensuring the success of our efforts to eradicate poverty, guarantee genuine human security for all, take seriously our commitments to human rights and become faithful stewards of our beleaguered planet.

To cite one example, the High-level Follow-up Conference on Financing for Development, which is to begin shortly in Doha, will be filled with references to improving human life and to the ideals of justice, peace, progress, freedom, cooperation, solidarity, tolerance and preferential treatment for the poor and vulnerable. Of course, these are principles that all beliefs and humanist ethical systems fully share.

I wish to encourage delegations to take advantage of this important Conference to join forces in a way that is consistent with the values that inspired our Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and work together to make meaningful progress towards solutions to the most urgent issues on the agenda of the Doha Conference. The Conference offers us the opportunity to translate these values into action.

In the section of the agenda concerning the mobilization of domestic resources, the outcome document now being negotiated begins with a reference to the need for human beings to be at one and the same time the main beneficiaries of development efforts and active participants in those efforts. It also refers to the need to elaborate appropriate policies in the fields of education, health, employment and social protection that are targeted to the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of the population, including women, children, the elderly and the disabled.

The agenda highlights the goal of decent work for all and the importance of building inclusive financial sectors and microfinance structures.

There are also references to the goal of improving international cooperation in tax matters, since it has been determined that billions of dollars that could be used for development are lost annually due to the failure of individuals and corporations to pay taxes. I believe we can all agree that it is the social and legal duty of citizens to contribute to the common good.

Likewise, there are calls for more vigorous efforts to combat corruption, a scourge that plagues societies both in the North and in the South, and to promote respect for the rule of law, human rights, inclusive democracy and good governance.

In the section dealing with international private capital flows, corporations making investments in developing countries are reminded of their duty of “corporate social responsibility” and non-predatory practices, which they sometimes take seriously in the North but not in the South. Similarly, in the section on international trade, all countries are held to their commitment to make the current round of multilateral trade negotiations a development round focused in particular on the needs of poorer countries.

In the section dealing with international official development assistance, donor countries are urged to respect their oft reiterated commitment to allocate at least 0.7 per cent of their gross domestic product to cooperation assistance to developing countries, a goal that is still far from being met. This should be seen as another essential moral duty of social justice, in other words, a way in which humankind as a whole could contribute to the common good. Those countries that have set targets for achieving this goal should accelerate their compliance, and those that have not set targets should do so. There are calls for the further exploration of various innovative sources of financing that may prove to be very useful for bringing us closer to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals, to compliance with

commitments to Africa's development needs and for the adoption of measures to deal with new challenges, such as climate change and the scarcity of food and energy.

In the section dealing with external debt, there is the proposal to identify more effective and just solutions to this distressing problem that threatens to destroy the prospects for growth and development in so many countries of the South. Solutions that have been put in place so far have been found to be insufficient and selective. For example, they only target countries with very low per-capita incomes and unjustly do not include the so-called middle-income countries, where most of the world's poor people actually live.

Finally, in the so-called systemic issues section of the Doha document, there is a call for a thorough review and revamping of the international financial structures and institutions, which are clearly not equipped to deal with the realities, problems and challenges of the 21st century. What is more, they do not adequately include developing countries in the global economic governance and decision-making processes.

This appeal reflects a fundamental concept of justice, solidarity and representative democracy, which must be applied at the international level, just as it is so passionately defended at the national level. The ongoing financial crisis has now become one of the central issues to be addressed in the Doha Conference. For this reason, it should not escape our attention and our strong collective support as people of faith and as a testimony of our love of God and of our neighbour. Solidarity must be the star that guides us all to the Peace that we must strive with our utmost commitment to attain.

May the compassionate, all-loving and merciful God enlighten our minds in our deliberations and strengthen our hearts so that, as people of faith and/or of deep ethical-philosophical convictions, we may rise to the occasion and take the courageous and heroic actions that are needed to save us from the grave consequences of the crises that threaten all of us, rich and poor, from the North and from the South, though, as it has always been, the greatest threats are faced by our dispossessed brothers and sisters throughout the world.

Thank you.