



Australian Bahá'í Community

Response to the Report of the Secretary-General, *In Larger Freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all*

The Australian Bahá'í Community welcomes the opportunity to present its views on the Secretary-General's report to the General Assembly, *In Larger Freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all* (A/59/2005). Our perspective is based on three propositions, which were set out in a Statement of the Bahá'í International Community on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations in 1995¹.

First, discussions about the future of the United Nations need to take place within the broad context of the evolution of the international order and its direction. The United Nations has co-evolved with other great institutions of the late twentieth century. It is in the aggregate that these institutions will define, and themselves be shaped by, the evolution of the international order. Therefore, the mission, role, operating principles and even activities of the United Nations should be examined only in the light of how they fit within the broader objective of the international order.

Second, since the body of humankind is one and indivisible, each member of the human race is born into the world as a trust of the whole. This relationship between the individual and the collective constitutes the moral foundation of most of the human rights which the instruments of the United Nations are attempting to define. It also serves to define an overriding purpose for the international order in establishing and preserving the rights of the individual.

Third, the discussions about the future of the international order must involve and excite the generality of humankind. This discussion is so important that it cannot be confined to leaders, be they in government, business, the academic community, religion, or organisations of civil society. On the contrary, this conversation must engage women and men at the grassroots level. Broad participation will make the process self-reinforcing by raising awareness of world citizenship and increase support for an expanded international order

It is thus our understanding that the processes of United Nations reform are part of an organic, evolutionary course characterised by increasing levels of integration and unity in governance structures and processes. In this light, we are encouraged by the Report's holistic approach – stressing the interdependence of development, freedom, and peace; emphasising human solidarity as the basis for effective and sustainable solutions to global challenges; and presenting a bold vision of new mechanisms and methods of work for the United Nations. We offer the following comments on each section of the report in turn.

¹ Bahá'í International Community. (1995). *Turning Point for All Nations*. Bahá'í International Community United Nations Office, New York <http://www.bic-un.bahai.org/95-1001.htm>

Freedom from want

- *Millennium Development Goals* (Paragraphs 28-32).

The Bahá'í Community welcomes the efforts of the United Nations to set forth concrete goals for development, in the form of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which seek to focus the work of the organisation with the aim of restoring justice and dignity to every human life. Material goals in themselves, however, are not sufficient to inspire and sustain processes of comprehensive development at the local, national and global levels. Equally important are aims to foster universal participation in the development processes, the development of individual capabilities to contribute to these processes, and the application of moral and intellectual resources from the fields of science and religion – two knowledge systems that have propelled our progress over the centuries. Ultimately, each individual, with the benefit of access to education, must be regarded as a protagonist in his or her own development and that of the community.

Alongside the concrete development targets set by the MDGs, it is imperative to attend to the realisation of moral or spiritual principles needed for constructive development. At the heart of such principles is the understanding that human nature is essentially spiritual and that a vision of development must be responsive to this reality. These principles may include: fostering unity in diversity, equity, justice, gender equality, moral leadership, and freedom of thought.²

Efforts to eradicate poverty must be accompanied by an earnest re-evaluation of global systems and processes - including governance, trade, and the private sector - that perpetuate the growing extremes of wealth and poverty. Specifically, there is a need for strong binding corporate rules at the national and international levels. Greater corporate accountability must not be restricted to the environment and labour standards but must also take into account the full panoply of human rights.

- *Gender* (Paragraph 40).

The principle of the equality of the sexes is fundamental to all realistic thinking about the future well-being of the earth and its people and we strongly support the promotion of gender equality as a prerequisite to development. Only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour will the moral and psychological climate be created in which a just and united world civilization can develop and flourish.

Freedom from fear

The Bahá'í Community welcomes the Report's comprehensive vision of collective security, based on the understanding that in our interconnected world, a threat to one State is a threat to all. The Bahá'í Community envisions a system of collective security within a framework of global federation, in which national borders have been conclusively defined and in whose favour all nations of the world will have willingly ceded claims to make war.

². *Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development*. A concept paper written by the Bahá'í International Community for the World Faiths and Development Dialogue at Lambeth Palace, London, 1998. <http://www.bic-un.bahai.org/98-0218.htm>

□ *Definition of terrorism* (Paragraph 91).

We support the Secretary-General's call for Member States to adopt a definition of terrorism and to conclude a comprehensive convention on terrorism. We agree with the Secretary-General's characterisation of terrorism as any action, "intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a Government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act." Moreover, problems such as terrorism should be consistently addressed within the context of other issues that disrupt and destabilise society. Nations must look beyond responding separately to disparate problems and move towards the building of a comprehensive international order based on social justice and collective security.

□ *Peacebuilding* (Paragraphs 114 –119)

We welcome the Secretary-General's identification of the need to address the challenges of helping countries with the transition from war to lasting peace. Critical to the success of such efforts is the involvement of women. Emphasis should be placed on the substantive involvement of women at all stages of peace-building and conflict resolution efforts, particularly post-conflict reconstruction. As women are intimately aware of the needs of their families and communities, plans for transition to a peaceful society must include their critical perspectives. Indeed, only as women take their rightful place in decision making at all levels will the conditions favourable to the establishment of peace emerge.

□ *Security Council* (Paragraph 167).

We acknowledge the need for urgent reform of the Security Council. The proposals in the Report, however, do not ultimately address the democracy deficit and relentless politicisation of the Security Council, which thwart the execution of its duties and undermine the trust and respect it needs to exercise its mandate. To address these deficits, the United Nations must boldly and intelligently move towards adopting a procedure for eventually eliminating permanent membership and veto power.³

Freedom to live in dignity

□ *Responsibility to Protect* (Paragraph 135).

We strongly support the "emerging norm of the collective responsibility to protect" and accompanying efforts to establish a principled framework about how and when to intervene justly and effectively to protect human rights. We agree that no legal principle, not even sovereignty, should ever be allowed to shield genocide and human suffering. Indeed, the Bahá'í Faith offers the concept of the oneness of humanity as an underlying principle of relations between States. Furthermore, we support the concept of a federated world polity responsive to the needs of an ever-changing world. The aim of such a polity, far from stifling intelligent patriotism or national autonomy, is rather the voluntary collective subordination of national impulses to the wider needs of an increasingly interdependent world. Its goal is captured in the concept of "unity in diversity."

³ See Bahá'í International Community. (1995). *Turning Point for All Nations*. op cit

□ *Human Rights.*

a. Human Rights Council (Paragraphs 181-183).

We support the Secretary-General's proposal to elevate the consideration of human rights to the same level accorded to security and socio-economic development. In order to restore the effective functioning of the discredited Human Rights Commission, we support the creation of an elected, standing Human Rights Council and the elaboration of minimum criteria for membership. Candidates for membership in the Council should demonstrate strong adherence to human rights standards; specific criteria may include the ratification of key human rights documents or a statement of intent to do so within a given period of time. Members of the Council that repeatedly violate human rights should not be allowed to remain on the Council.

b. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (Paragraphs 142-146)

1. We agree that OHCHR is ill-equipped to respond effectively to the human rights challenges facing the international community. As such, we support the Secretary-General's call for more resources to train country teams within the OHCHR and urge the OHCHR to establish a strong field presence at the country level, providing leadership and coordination on matters of promotion and protection of human rights.
2. Special Procedures should receive adequate budgetary and administrative support. Government cooperation with Special Procedures should not be limited to access, but should also include full implementation of recommendations made. The OHCHR should take steps to bolster interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteurs. The dialogues should include Member States' reports on the status of implementation of recommendations.
3. The OHCHR should continue its productive engagement with NGOs, which has contributed positively to the work of the Office and to the development of NGO capacity to interact meaningfully in this context.⁴
4. Appropriate budgetary resources must support the ambitious mandate of the OHCHR. The core functions of the Office should be independent of voluntary contributions. Governments should decrease the percentage of earmarked funds, according more latitude to the Office in determining its needs
5. The Public Information section of the OHCHR should be developed to allow resolutions of the Commission on Human Rights/Human Rights Council, recommendations of the Special Procedures and concluding observations of the treaty monitoring bodies to be accorded more prominence in the media.

⁴ Similarly, NGO involvement in the work of the proposed Human Rights Council should not be diminished.

□ *Democracy* (Paragraphs 158-151).

We commend the Secretary General and the international community for their commitment to democracy and to a freely elected government as a universal value. We support in principle the creation of a democracy fund at the United Nations. At the same time, we note that democracy in its truest sense must be rooted in moral values, intertwined with responsibilities, and concerned with social welfare both within and beyond the nation state. Without this principled anchor, it is vulnerable to the excesses of unbridled individualism and nationalism, which tear at the fabric of the community - both nationally and globally.

Other points for consideration at the Millennium + 5 Summit:

It is significant that the Secretary General chose to frame his report in the context of freedoms. Certainly a dominant factor in the turmoil of the times has been the lack of freedom from fear, poverty, and oppression. There is no doubt as to the high importance of freedoms to constructive social processes. Yet the freedoms with which we are privileged are concomitant with responsibility – the responsibility to exercise our freedoms in a way that enables all to attain to happiness and to fulfil their purpose in their individual life and in their collective functioning as a society. It is the abuse of freedoms and the denial of responsibilities with which elected and appointed officials at both national and international levels have been vested that must remain at the forefront of deliberations about United Nations reform.

□ *Freedom of religion or belief.*

The Secretary General's report does not make mention of one of the central and most challenging issues shaping inter and intra-State relations today, namely the freedom of religion or belief. At a time when religious extremism, intolerance, and discrimination are threatening peace and security in many parts of the world, it is imperative for the United Nations to address this issue openly and earnestly. Until all people are free to openly practice and share their beliefs within the parameters of equally applied laws, as well as change their religion or belief system, development and peace will prove elusive.

□ *Condemning religious extremism and terrorism.*

While the United Nations' human rights machinery has been used to condemn religious intolerance and persecution, United Nations development policies and programs have barely begun to address religious extremism as a major obstacle to peace and well-being. Hesitancy to acknowledge and forcefully condemn the religious extremism motivating terrorist acts weakens the effectiveness of the United Nations' efforts to bring an end to international terrorism. Only by identifying and understanding the motivation behind such acts can they be effectively combated.

The Bahá'í Community looks forward to being actively engaged in consultation on, and implementation of, the proposed reforms of the United Nations, with a view to the creation of a United Nations capable of meeting the changing needs and growing aspirations of the generality of humankind.

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