

**PERSPECTIVE: CHALLENGES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: A GLOBAL
PERSPECTIVE
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As we stand less than a month away from the dawn of a new century, it is important for us to recognize the enormous challenges that we face ahead of us in the 21st century and about how we can overcome them using our collective wisdom. I am going to focus on three major challenges that I believe we need to overcome: the environment, economic development and peace.

On Oct. 12 this year, the United Nations announced an important milestone that we crossed as a civilization: the birth of a 6 billionth person on this planet. Back in 1800 there were just 1 billion of us in a few dawning industrial cities. We hit 3 billion in 1960 and have doubled since then in the blink of a planetary eye.

Not only are there more of us, but each of us is literally bigger, as measured by the space we and our stuff take up, the energy and material we take from earth, and the pollutants and wastes we return to the earth. We now cover the globe with our lights and buildings and farms and roads and cars and planes and ships. We have made a global-scale impact; we have spewed out enough chlorofluorocarbons to eat away the ozone layer and enough greenhouse gases to change the climate; we are moving into the space and resources of other species and wiping them out in an extinction spasm greater than anything the earth has seen since the fall of the dinosaurs.

We are growing at the rate of roughly 78 million per year, the equivalent of a new Mexico City every six months, or a new Bangkok or Lima or Cairo every month, or a new Philadelphia or Guatemala City every week. Virtually all that growth is happening in the countries we delicately call “developing.” This brings us to another major challenge that we face—that of “development.” While much of the credit for the environmental destruction goes to few of us privileged to live in developed countries, it is important to recognize that there are still 3 billion people on this planet who are living under \$2 a day and 1.3 billion living under \$1 a day. In another 30 years there will be another 2.5 to 3 billion people in that group.

As many of these countries struggle for economic and social progress, where victory spells freedom from want, they are also at the same time constantly faced with struggle for peace and security—where victory spells freedom from fear. According to a U.N. estimate, five and a half million people have died in war during the 1990s. Many times that number have had their lives ruined—by injury, by the loss of their loved ones, by being driven from their homes, or by the destruction of their property. The vast majority of these conflicts occur in the developing world.

In spite of these nasty statistics, or perhaps because of them, as we come to the millennium, we should focus on the opportunities. The world is a rich place. It is a place of culture, of many cultures; it is a place where there are great experiences in the large cities, in the villages and great experiences in the jungles that we can learn from. There are great experiences throughout the world we can exchange.

As we approach the millennium, it is time for us to look at how we can protect our precious planet. It is time for us to think of new responsibilities and possibilities. It is a time when we should look at ourselves, a time when we should look at what we are going to leave our children, a time when we should reassess what we are doing and how we are doing it. It is time for us to leave a world that is peaceful and prosperous for our children.

The practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is for self and others. This is the purpose of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo: happiness for oneself and for others. The Daishonin's Buddhism was known in his time as the Buddhism of the poor. The people took up this faith out of desperation; it was their last resort. These people were so desperate to be happy that they practiced. They were taught to chant not only for themselves but also for others — to share this faith with others.

In his 1997 peace proposal, SGI President Ikeda says: "Indeed, every one of us should realize that we possess the nobility of spirit to be the main actor in changing the course of history, and with that conviction, to undertake, the task we share of solving the global issues of our time."

He adds: "Humankind is at a major turning point: Will it simply extend the existing course of history and wait for self-destruction? Or will it open up a new horizon and create a truly 'global' and genuinely human civilization?"

"We must choose the latter. The crux of our challenge is whether to simply be a passenger on the ship of fate, leaving everything to others, or to take the helm and be responsible for that ship ourselves to search, with the help of all, for the most desirable course."

He further states: "Working together with people of good throughout the world, we will rally courage and pool our wisdom to overcome the crises of civilization, the greatest challenges humankind has ever faced, and open the door to a third millennium where the sanctity of every individual life shines with hope and glory."

My friends, let's greet the first day of the new millennium with the full combination of seriousness, hope, humility, inspiration and love the occasion deserves. By doing this, we might actually begin to demonstrate our capability to handle the challenges of our 6 billion.

I suggest that, we individual folks, each of us an infinitesimal drop in that huge sea, refuse to simplify or trivialize these issues — refuse to caricature each other as either the scourges or the conquerors of the earth, refuse to despair, refuse even to rejoice. We know better. We know of the tremendous problems we face along with the billions of other creatures that co-inhabit our planet. We also know of the incredible accomplishments we've already made and the hundreds of other solutions just waiting in the wings.

I hope we will have the courage to respect each other, encourage each other, reach out to each other, create and commit to the vision of all of us having enough resources to develop our talents, and participate and contribute to a great turning toward a diverse, sufficient, equitable, joyful and sustainable future.