

THE SGI AND THE U.N. NGO FORUM NGO DELEGATES SHARE VIEWS ON THE UNITED NATIONS

**BY JOAN ANDERSON AND CONGDON SMITH
SGI OFFICE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION DEPUTY DIRECTOR AND SGI
OFFICE OF PEACE AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS DEPUTY DIRECTOR**

As a nongovernmental organization affiliated with the United Nations, the SGI participated in the NGO Millennium Forum at the U.N. Headquarters in New York during the week of May 22–26. SGI representatives joined more than 1,000 other NGO delegates from more than 100 countries invited by the United Nations to share their views on how the United Nations could best meet the challenges of the 21st century. There were two facets to the SGI's involvement in the forum: One was the dispatch of a delegation to the forum itself, and the other was the sponsorship of two public symposia in its support.

Together with other NGO delegates, SGI representatives discussed the pressing global issues of peace, poverty eradication, human rights, sustainable development, globalization and the need to strengthen and democratize the United Nations. Of particular significance for the SGI is that the final forum report, the Millennium Forum Declaration, included ideas from SGI President Ikeda's 2000 peace proposal, "Peace Through Dialogue: A Time to Talk." The Forum Declaration is to be presented to the Millennium Assembly of U.N. member-states and the Millennium Summit of heads of state to be held at the United Nations starting Sept. 5 and 6, respectively.

The declaration's section on peace, security and disarmament embraces an idea of the SGI president, calling on the United Nations to create a Conflict Prevention Committee within the Security Council to serve as a mechanism for "conflict prevention and early warning."

Regarding the issues of sustainable development and the environment, the document urges civil society "to adopt and disseminate the Earth Charter as a tool for promotion of values and actions which will create sustainable development." It reflects another of the SGI leader's ideas, stating that the best way to transform the prevailing consumerist culture is to work for change in human values first.

During the forum, participants heard speeches outlining the significance and role of civil society organizations in the new century. Addressing his global audience, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said that NGOs bring the concept of "We the People"—the first words of the U.N. Charter—to bear on discussions on global issues. "The people are the new superpower" and governments have to be held accountable to them, Mr. Annan said.

Stating that the role of civil society is now more important than ever, the secretary-general expressed his wish for NGOs to be good partners to the United Nations on the one hand while leading it on the other. The U.N. chief went on to urge NGOs to work with, and not against, businesses, governments and the World Trade Organization to overcome problems presented by globalization.

An active figure in the NGO community, James Garrison of the State of the World Forum, clearly defined the often vaguely understood role of civil society organizations. He did this by first noting that government derives its power and legitimacy from territory and taxation, while business obtains power from its ability to create wealth. Civil society,

meanwhile, gets its power and legitimacy from the recognition that “all life is sacred” and because it “represents the conscience of the world, expressed with compassion.” The implication of Mr. Garrison’s observations was not lost on the audience: The role of civil society is to be active in areas in which government and business are unable or unwilling to take action.

Two public events were cosponsored by SGI in support of the Millennium Forum. Each enabled participants a chance to think about the role they would want to play in the effort to create peace.

On May 23, a symposium entitled “From a Century of War and Violence to a Century of Peace and Hope” was hosted by the SGI at Columbia University Teacher’s College—the same location at which President Ikeda spoke in June 1996.

This event kicked off with a moving presentation on the culture of peace by the Renaissance Players, third and seventh graders from C.S. 197M and Frederick Douglas Academy, coached by their teacher, Joannie Weisberger, a member of SGI-USA’s New York East Region. Quoting from President Ikeda, Martin Luther King Jr., Walt Whitman and Mahatma Gandhi, the children spoke of their dream of peace with more sincerity and passion than most adults are capable of. The children prepared all the material used themselves, reminding the audience that “No child is a mere child.”

The first speaker was Miyoko Matsubara, who was a 12-year-old schoolgirl in Hiroshima, Japan, when the atomic bomb was dropped on her city on Aug. 6, 1945. She described her anguish at not being able to save her best friend, and how only 37 of her 250 schoolmates survived. For her, she said, every day is Aug. 6, 1945. Her cry of “I hate war” pierced listeners’ hearts. Mrs. Matsubara says that she is deeply inspired by President Ikeda’s words “A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation, and further, will enable a change in the destiny of all mankind.”

Gouri Sadhwani, director of The Hague Appeal for Peace, then spoke about the momentum for peace stemming from the historic gathering of 10,000 peace activists at The Hague in the Netherlands last year. She clarified that peace is not just the absence of war. Peace must include the absence of social injustice, of colonialism, of environmental degradation and of poverty. She described how The Hague Appeal for Peace intends to see that peace education reaches every school in the world.

Majid Tehranian, director of the Toda Global Peace and Policy Research Institute, then described the 20th century as that of death by design. He urged that in the 21st century be one of peace by design, describing the Toda Institute’s programs that promote a dialogue of civilizations.

On May 25, a large audience gathered at the New York Culture Center for a discussion on “Creation of Violence-Free Communities” featuring Yvette Edmond, co-chair of the SGI-USA Victory Over Violence program and Youth Peace Committee, with guest speakers.

Nickolai Parker, from the World Movement for Nonviolence, outlined that organization’s programs to reach schools with the message of King and Gandhi. Dr. “Raj” Ramanathapillai of the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence then spoke of Gandhi’s philosophy and how violence comes from ignorance of our interconnectedness.

The audience was captivated by Dr. Raj’s account of a bomb attack in his native Sri Lanka. Terrorists aiming at a military camp had failed to reach their target, and their bomb had exploded in a crowded bus just yards from the entrance to the camp. Witnessing the

explosion, Dr. Raj debated whether to approach the soldier on guard at the entrance to the camp for help, aware that this soldier could start shooting, thinking that he was a terrorist.

He walked towards the soldier with his hands up, maintaining eye contact, and then asked the soldier if he could call a military truck to take the injured to the hospital. After a moment in which Dr. Raj said “my whole life changed,” the soldier agreed. This was Dr. Raj’s first experience of positive nonviolence in action.

Yvette Edmond described the incredible success of the VOV project, which addresses violence, including passive violence like name-calling or putting people down, on a person-to-person level. More than 3,000 VOV discussion meetings have been held, and more than 100,000 people have signed the VOV pledge. Requests from schools and education authorities in many areas are pouring in, and VOV urgently needs a bigger pool of trained youth facilitators in order to respond. VOV is now working in partnership with other groups addressing youth violence, such as Passages to Peace, a group for former gang members, and Global Network.

The final speaker was the charismatic Dr. Paul Smith, civil rights movement veteran and pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. He urged everyone to start with personal transformation and deal with his or her hate, fear and prejudice. He asked the audience to take action and not be afraid of making mistakes, to “think outside the box” and make what we hunger for real. Dr. Smith endeared himself to the SGI-USA members by encouraging them to chant whenever faced with difficult or violent situations. “This is New York,” he said. “Everybody’s talking to themselves or singing. If someone next to you has a bad attitude, chant!”

These thought-provoking evenings, which also featured lively Q-and-A sessions, helped the SGI-USA members to see that they really are part of a global movement of citizens working for a better world. Their Buddhist practice and principles equip them perfectly to work for peace.