

## **DIALOGUES ON PEACE TREASURING THE WORLD'S YOUNG PEOPLE**

**‘Treasuring young people is the mark of a genuine leader. Authoritarian leaders sacrifice and skillfully exploit the youth. This was true in the past, and it remains true today.’**

On May 22, SGI President Ikeda paid a courtesy call on President Olusegun Obasanjo of the Federal Republic of Nigeria at the State Guest House in Moto-Akasaka, Tokyo. This was their fourth meeting, and the first since April 1999, at which time Mr. Obasanjo was president-elect.

At the outset of their 40-minute exchange, President Ikeda congratulated the Nigerian leader on the keynote lecture he had given that morning at the United Nations University’s 2001 Africa Day symposium on the “Millennium Africa Recovery Plan.” In the speech, President Obasanjo expressed confidence that Africa would make great contributions to the world. He affirmed that the continent’s abundant natural resources, unspoiled natural habitat, rain forests and rich cultural heritage are an asset belonging to all humankind.

Mr. Obasanjo stressed the importance of a strong commitment to nonviolence and cited Nigeria’s peaceful transition from military dictatorship to democracy. He described such developments in Africa as a sign of hope for both the present and the future. Praising these comments, President Ikeda agreed that Africa’s recovery would lead to the revitalization of the world, and of humanity.

In 1976, Nigeria’s leader General Murtala Muhammad was assassinated, and Mr. Obasanjo, then 38, succeeded him as head of state. During the next three years, he introduced free elementary school education and established a number of universities. He also worked to promote agriculture and rebuild the nation’s finances.

In what was perhaps his most important achievement, Mr. Obasanjo promoted the adoption of a new constitution enshrining the principle of the sovereignty of the people, thus opening the way to democratic rule. In 1979, true to his word, General Obasanjo transferred power to an elected civilian government and retired from politics, bringing an end to the military regime that had ruled the country for 13 years. He was the first Nigerian leader to step down to make way for democracy.

Nigeria’s first civilian government remained in power for only four years. The military regime that succeeded it, which swept to power with a 1983 coup d’état, was marked by corruption, embezzlement of public funds and brutal suppression of human rights.

In 1995, Mr. Obasanjo fell out of favor with the ruling regime for criticizing its dictatorial policies. He was arrested on trumped-up charges, sentenced to death by a secret tribunal, and then incarcerated in the notorious Yola prison.

In the aftermath of Mr. Obasanjo’s arrest, a number of world leaders issued appeals for his release, including then South African President Nelson Mandela, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. This resulted in his sentence being commuted to 15 years. He regained his freedom with the death of the dictator General Sani Abacha in 1998. And the following year he was elected president.

Mr. Ikeda brought up President Obasanjo’s address at the Millennium Summit of the U.N. General Assembly last September, in which he had stated: “The new Millennium is

being shaped by forces of globalization that are turning our world into a village. Thus the new millennium will demand of us, more than ever before, to live and work together as members of one human family....Globalization has to be seen to mean the eradication of poverty. And then, and only then, will the true spirit of good neighborliness reign in the new global village.” The SGI leader praised this speech as articulating a philosophy for all people in the 21st century, and stressed that leaders must put these principles into practice.

Mr. Obasanjo demurred, saying that he was simply a “child of a village.” In a village, he explained, people know one another, they help each other, they exchange greetings, they treasure each person, and they seek to help those who are facing difficulties. He said he wished to expand this model to the global community; to make it possible for all people to value one another as they do in a village. President Ikeda observed that the idea of taking a practicable principle and expanding it throughout society is analogous to the way the teachings of Buddhism are expounded.

The SGI leader praised President Obasanjo’s speech at the celebration marking the 40th anniversary of Nigeria’s independence last October, in which he said: “I entertain great hope in and have much respect for our youth. I do not disdain the youth or youthfulness.... I know that the young must have a voice and that the young shall grow, which is what keeps the world going.”

Lauding the Nigerian president’s spirit of love and respect for the youth, Mr. Ikeda said: “Treasuring young people is the mark of a genuine leader. Authoritarian leaders sacrifice and skillfully exploit the youth. This was true in the past, and it remains true today. There is an unmistakable difference between a genuine leader and a despot. Whether someone loves the youth is clear from whether they put energy into education.” He also quoted President Obasanjo as saying that education is the ultimate means for changing society, and called these profound words.