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A Public Statement by Soka Gakkai International (SGI) to the United Nations General Assembly First Committee October 2018, New York

Overview

As an organization whose activities for a nuclear-weapon-free world are rooted in the Buddhist philosophy of respect for life, the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) wishes to submit the following statement to help further the deliberations of the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly.

Protecting human rights and dignity

In her acceptance speech for the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize, Setsuko Thurlow concisely expressed the essence of the nuclear issue: “Humanity and nuclear weapons cannot coexist.” This means, in the simplest terms, that we must choose: nuclear weapons or humanity, where humanity points to more than just the continued physical existence of our species, but also to our ability to live in ways that can be identified as humane and toward which all societies have continued to strive.

Nuclear weapons have not only threatened humanity’s physical survival, they have profoundly impeded our individual and shared quest for humanity in this most essential sense.

The imperative to protect the freedom and dignity of all people is rooted in the recognition that each of us is inherently precious and irreplaceable. The continued existence of nuclear weapons and the growing threat of their use embody a diametrically opposed view of humanity: that we lack inherent value and are ultimately expendable. As such they are incompatible with the quest for human freedom and dignity and the international human rights system to which that quest has given rise.

A planetwide quest for human freedom

In the wake of the unprecedented destruction of World War II, “freedom from fear” was declared as a crucial, necessary element of our birthright as humans. Nuclear weapons, predicated on fear, have constituted a direct and constant assault on that freedom.

Similarly, the enormous cost of nuclear weapons, with the nuclear-weapon states now allocating trillions of dollars for modernization, continues to undermine another consensus ideal of the post-World War II world: freedom from want. As the world rallies toward the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, we simply cannot afford the wasteful folly of nuclear weapons, either in their present or their future modernized forms.

Perhaps the most pernicious assault nuclear weapons wreak on our humanity lies in the destructive fallacy that we have no choice but to submit to the products of our own minds, to the apparent imperatives of our own technological creations.

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In this sense, the struggle to eliminate nuclear weapons represents a crucial opportunity for humankind to recover long-threatened qualities of agency, dignity, freedom and solidarity. These quintessentially human qualities can be effectively deployed in the resolution of the pressing, planetwide challenges we face.

Commitment to survival, human freedom and dignity

We believe that this commitment not simply to survival, but to human freedom and dignity, animated the adoption, in July of last year, of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) by 122 governments, demonstrating the strong will for the elimination of nuclear weapons that exists within the international community.

We urge all States to engage in constructive debate toward the goal of a world free from nuclear weapons and to support the signing, ratification and early entry into force of the TPNW. We encourage governments not yet supporting the TPNW to make public specific TPNW prohibitions to which they are ready to commit. The prohibition on the transfer of nuclear weapons, for example, or against assisting other states in acquiring nuclear weapons, are among those to which the nuclear-weapon states should be able to commit.

Likewise, nuclear-dependent states should consider committing to the prohibition on using or threatening to use nuclear weapons and against assisting, encouraging or inducing such acts in light of their respective security policies.

We know that, through technical failures, miscalculation and misapprehension, nuclear deterrence has verged on failure many times since 1945. Humankind has avoided nuclear disaster more through luck than design, and our luck cannot be expected to hold indefinitely. It is necessary to bring about a fundamental shift in the perception of nuclear weapons among people in the nuclear-weapon states and nuclear-dependent states in order to break the perilous spell of misplaced faith in nuclear deterrence.

Such a shift can be achieved by raising public awareness through peace and disarmament education in formal and non-formal settings. A preambular paragraph of the TPNW underscores this point, when it states that, “Recognizing also the importance of peace and disarmament education in all its aspects and of raising awareness of the risks and consequences of nuclear weapons for current and future generations, and committed to the dissemination of the principles and norms of this Treaty...”

It is important that such efforts in disarmament education take inclusive and intersectional approaches. Examining disarmament issues through the lens of social justice, for example, will enable participation from more diverse groups of people and communities. Furthermore, we believe that, when implemented successfully, peace and disarmament education addresses the struggle for disarmament as a struggle against all forms of injustice and intolerance. It can counter and transform the impulse to negate others who look or think differently to us, or to strike out at those whom we deem a threat. At the heart of peace and disarmament education is a belief in and an insistence on a sustainable peace.

What LAWS wrest from human hands

Over the decades, the UN has proven itself as a forum for building new norms and treaties in arms control and disarmament. Recent processes examining the growing use of unmanned and increasingly autonomous weapons systems have shed light on the need to improve compliance, capacity and

transparency all the way along the chain from where arms are made to where they are put to use. Multilateral forums on Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) are essential because new technologies cannot be allowed to outpace ethical responsibility and collective commitment to the rule of law.

LAWS can select and engage individual targets without meaningful human control. Such weapons are unlikely to be able to adhere to international humanitarian law as it is unlikely that they will be able to properly distinguish between civilians and combatants, or to make a proportionality assessment. While the deployment of LAWS might reduce military casualties, it could lower the threshold for the use of force. These weapons could lead to accidental and rapid escalation of conflict as fully autonomous weapons react and interact with each other at speeds beyond human control.

There exist common concerns about fundamental moral and ethical questions that LAWS raise regarding the right to life, the principles of international humanitarian and human rights law as well as the threat of a new international arms race. Surrendering the decision over life and death to a machine sanitizes the act of killing, lowering the threshold for the use of lethal force; it undermines the principles of human autonomy, responsibility and dignity, as well as the right to life. Many of the processes controlling the targeting and launching of nuclear weapons are already computerized, and it is chilling to contemplate any further advance in their automation.

Empathy to recover autonomy

At the heart of the issues of nuclear weapons and LAWS is the radical negation of others—of their humanity and of their equal right to happiness and life.

As Buddhists upholding the value and dignity of life, we believe that this can only be countered through a sustained effort to expand our individual and shared capacities for imaginative empathy. In the Buddha's teachings we find these words:

All tremble at violence; life is dear to all. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill;¹

There is a universal impulse to avoid suffering and harm. We all have an intuitive sense of the unique value of our individual being. To the degree that we can realize that others feel the same way, we can sense the reality of their suffering and embrace their dignity. Such empathy makes genuine dialogue possible. And dialogue is the most certain path to realizing our shared quest for the authentic experience of security.

Just as the elimination of nuclear weapons provides the opportunity for humankind to free itself from thrall to technology, the ongoing efforts not to give a birth to LAWS offers states an opportunity to recover and embody the autonomy expressed in the ideal of sovereignty; that is, to manifest autonomy over circumstance and in fulfilling their own freely undertaken commitments. Technological advances may expand the realm of what we *can* do—what is possible—but this cannot be allowed to obscure or obviate painful reckoning with the question of what we *should* do—what is right and what is wrong. As individuals and governments, we cannot avoid these questions, and grappling with them is essential to our humanity.

¹ Buddha. "Violence" in *The Dhammapada*. Chapter 10: 130.

Therefore, we urge the UN States Parties to:

1. Address the issue of disarmament not only as an agenda pertaining to security and being understood from military and political perspectives, but also as a moral and ethical imperative;
2. Incorporate greater diversity by ensuring intersectional approaches are brought into disarmament processes;
3. Continue to heed the voices of civil society, especially those of the world's hibakusha (all the victims and survivors of nuclear weapons), so that the disarmament process will have a consistently human focus; and to declare the shared commitment of the world's people that the suffering endured by the hibakusha must never be repeated;
4. Recommit to the unequivocal undertaking to achieve and maintain a world without nuclear weapons, noting that the fundamental justification for the TPNW is the prevention of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of such weapons and thus necessitating its entry into force as early as possible;
5. Support proposals for substantive discussions in multilateral forums on a legally-binding instrument to prohibit LAWS;
6. Support peace and disarmament education initiatives globally and locally, and report on their government's disarmament education efforts in their interventions.