



Interview with UN Under-Secretary General Izumi Nakamitsu, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

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At this time when the world is facing the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of climate change, and so many other issues of global concern, the United Nations is marking its seventy-fifth anniversary.

At the recent High-Level Meeting to Commemorate the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the United Nations, leaders of each state delivered their speeches via video. I found it striking that most of them strongly urged the importance of international cooperation and stressed the role of the United Nations at this moment of crisis.

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, humanity was facing numerous daunting challenges, from climate change to peace and security issues, including disarmament, the wealth gap, and inequality. The majority of Member States stressed the message that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) had been established to resolve those issues and that now is the time to work together to make them a reality.

In January of this year, to mark its seventy-fifth anniversary, the UN launched the largest ever global conversation on the world's future, "UN75: 2020 and Beyond—Shaping our Future Together." In a survey it conducted, over one million citizens from every Member State were asked to prioritize the problems they felt needed to be solved and to suggest what the UN could do to facilitate those efforts. Some 80 percent responded that given the present state of the world international cooperation is absolutely essential.

To respond to these expectations, the UN needs to reform what needs to be reformed and strengthen what needs to be strengthened. It needs to consolidate the concerns articulated by the people of different nations, informed by their diverse viewpoints. That is the greatest task of the UN at this point, in my opinion.



Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu

The Soka Gakkai International, as an NGO having consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council since 1983, has taken action to address many global issues. What expectations do you have for such civil society support for the UN?

The role of civil society is extremely important. The activities of NGOs have played a major role in creating the groundswell of international public opinion that contributed significantly to the adoption of the Anti-Personnel Landmines Convention (APLC), the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM), and more recently, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). They also play an important role



with regards to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). In a way, it can be said that they created the momentum that brought the leaders of the world to the negotiating table. That's the degree of influence they exert.

The UN has especially high hopes for the role of young people in this regard. The activism of Greta Thunberg in the area of climate change is well known, but young people have also played a creative role in the area of disarmament. For example, a group of young people has been working on a digital platform for sharing the experiences of hibakusha, including developing an app for a virtual tour of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is really encouraging to see young people taking the initiative in this manner, and supporting these cross-national networks being created by young people is a top priority for us.

Considering the pace of progress in nuclear disarmament today, what efforts do you regard as necessary to accelerate it?

We are presently facing very serious security issues concerning nuclear disarmament. In addition to the tensions between the United States and Russia, the relationship between the US and China is also deteriorating. In addition, all the nuclear-weapon states are modernizing their arsenals, and we are seeing the beginning of an arms race based on the quality rather than the quantity of nuclear weapons.

In addition, the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty between the US and Russia, the two nations that hold some 90 percent of the global nuclear arsenal, is no longer in effect, and the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) is set to lapse in February of next year. Meanwhile tensions remain high in the Middle East and South Asia, and there is a growing risk of nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia as well.

I believe the situation today represents the greatest threat for the use of nuclear weapons since the end of the Cold War. We cannot ignore the possibility that some misstep could lead to the pressing of the nuclear button.

If we wish to put an end to this situation, the nuclear-weapon states will need to engage in dialogue-based security measures. The UN's consistent message is that disarmament is an important tool for securing the safety of all nations. Through dialogue, through negotiations, we can attain the security we all desire, without depending upon proliferation.

Following the nuclear showdown between the US and the Soviet Union over Cuba in 1962, both nations awakened to the need for direct talks and created a communications hotline to prevent catastrophe. I would like to see both nations return to that way of thinking and advance along the path of nuclear disarmament through dialogue. I hope they will strive to make the upcoming NPT Review Conference scheduled for January 2021 an opportunity to do so.

Some good news in all this is that the TPNW will soon be entering into force. UN Secretary-General António Guterres said at the High-level Meeting on Nuclear Disarmament of October 2, "I look forward to the entry-into-force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which reflects the desire of a large number of States to free the world of the threat." The treaty takes effect ninety days after the required ratification by fifty states, and we are engaged in preparations for that.

How important is a world without nuclear weapons from the perspective of a Culture of Peace?

Peace is not simply the absence of war, but is only truly realized when the conditions for peace in all its aspects are attained. In that sense, I believe that a world without nuclear weapons is not only a common goal for all the world, but striving to attain that goal is an extremely important process: it is the means to create the all-embracing peace that is entailed in building a culture of peace.

In the twenty-first century, nuclear disarmament will involve many new issues, including the deployment of such emerging technologies as cybernetics and AI in warfare and the proliferation of weapons in space. Only when human beings are protected from all such threats can true peace be assured in terms of human



rights and human security.

The UN has departments working not only on disarmament but the issues of development, climate change, human rights, and many others as well. None of these problems can be resolved over night, but I believe it is important to advance one step at a time in all of these areas in order to create peace in the fullest sense.

This month marks the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, which endorses the role of women in building peace.

UNSCR 1325 is extremely important. Discussions on it began at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in 1995 in Beijing. In that it is an affirmation by the UN Security Council that women must be regarded as central with regard to the issues of peace and security, it is indeed a historic step.

Data verifies the truth underlying this resolution, showing that peace agreements arrived at with the participation of women are the most enduring. This demonstrates just how crucial it is for women to play a central role in peace issues. It is not only important from the perspective of women's rights and human rights, but, as Secretary-General Guterres has often said, the participation of women is an "operational necessity" for achieving every goal.

For example, earlier I mentioned the importance of the role of NGOs, and it has been women's groups that have given the biggest push for the adoption of disarmament treaties. This was true of the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (PTBT), the Mine Ban Treaty (MBT), the CCM, and the NPT. Setsuko Thurlow, a survivor of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, was an important spokesperson leading up to the adoption of the TPNW, and Beatrice Fihn, the Executive Director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), played a major role in moving the ball forward. Women speaking out and taking action was directly linked to the final result. There are many examples confirming the truth of UNSCR 1325.

You have been directly involved in tough negotiations regarding conflicts and refugee assistance. What beliefs have guided you in those situations?

My mentor, Sadako Ogata, taught me the importance of being on the ground. If you truly care about helping those who are in trouble, you need to be where they are and experience what they are experiencing. She also taught me to always act in a way that would stand up to the judgment of history and never to allow bureaucracy or precedent to stand in the way of doing what is right.

In difficult negotiations, I believe it is important to genuinely understand the other party and really listen to what they are saying. It is often said that the Japanese tendency toward self-effacement doesn't serve us well in international society, but communication is always a two-way street. During this COVID-19 pandemic in particular, nations have been cut off from one another, and divisions within nations and among communities have also emerged. Precisely because of this situation, I believe we need to humbly listen to one another.

Another important factor in negotiations is sincerity. In conflict zones, we often find ourselves dealing with parties who are dishonest and untrustworthy. Nevertheless, I have always adopted the attitude that



Ms. Nakamitsu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo



“I am listening to you and I will respond sincerely.” To forge a trusting relationship, one has to keep this up until the other party decides, “She always listens to us, so I suppose we can listen to what she has to say, too.”

Sincerity is especially important in disarmament negotiations, which are particularly challenging. We need to listen to the victims, not only of nuclear weapons but also of small arms, landmines, and so forth. Only when we have truly grasped and shared their pain are we motivated to take action to change the harsh reality confronting us. The same principle applies to refugee assistance and conflict resolution, I believe.

In conflict zones, one finds many wonderful individuals who, in spite of their painful circumstances, have not abandoned their human dignity and are living with courage and moral conscience. Encounters with such individuals are the treasures of a lifetime. They are the motivation that enables me to continue to do what I do. ■