PEACEBUILDING: HUMAN RIGHTS, DEVELOPMENT, DISARMAMENT AND SECURITY

Peacebuilding, a driving force in the creation of the United Nations, is at a critical juncture. It is crucial that the way states respond to this situation does not neglect the environmental, social and human rights challenges we face. Otherwise, levels of security and peace will fall.

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One of the five points that United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has put forward to structure discussions at the Summit of the Future in September 2024 is devoted exclusively to international peace and security. This is to some extent logical: the United Nations came into being as a collective response to channel the desire to maintain peace in the face of the atrocities occurring in the 20th century (the Holocaust, the Second World War, the atomic bomb). But its prominence in the document is also a reflection of the enormous challenges to security we must meet and of the precariousness of peace at the present time. It is a warning sign and a wake-up call, too. Because without peace the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the climate agenda and the guarantee of human rights are at even greater risk.

After the end of the Cold War and a number of years when the reinforcement of the international system and a drop in armed conflicts suggested a less belligerent, more rules- and consensus-based world was on the horizon, war is back again. And it is taking a heavy toll on the international system, human rights and security. The facts are clear: we face an era of more armed conflicts, with a high number of deaths on account of those conflicts and many more refugees and displaced persons

fleeing war. In addition, all the vectors that form an integral part of the progress and possibility of peace (human rights, democracy, sustainable development, etc) are also in a critical state. Which is why it is essential to react, propose concrete steps forward and demand commitment and engagement from governments.

Rights at a crossroads

The number of democratic countries is shrinking, while authoritarianism is on the rise. According to the *Democracy Index* compiled by *The Economist* since 2006, the years 2022 and 2023 saw the lowest levels of democratic countries (full or hybrid) and the highest numbers of authoritarian regimes. Similarly, the V-Dem Democracy Report 2024 found that the advances in global levels of democracy in the last 35 years have evaporated: several countries are shifting from democracy to dictatorship and 71% of the word's population live in autocracies. Not only is authoritarianism gaining ground, it is also rated more highly. According to an Open Society Barometer from 2023, 42% of people under 36 across the world think that a military dictatorship is the best political regime. The crisis of legitimacy and credibility that many democratic governments are suffering, the inability to find answers to the many social and economic problems besetting people, or the growing dissatisfaction and fear among a good part of citizens are certainly not helping to strengthen democracies.

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But we are not only facing a world with more authoritarianism. We can also see how the quality of democracy is becoming more precarious and fragile in democratic countries and how numerous human rights violations are being normalised and mainstreamed. It is significant that a couple of decades ago, in the expectation (and confidence) that civil and political rights appeared to be firmly embedded around us, human rights organisations considered beginning to pursue demands in the area of social and economic rights. Yet precisely in the last two decades there has been a notable decline in the most fundamental human rights (freedom of expression, of assembly, of demonstration, etc). As Amnesty International alerted in relation to its recent report on the state of human rights in the world, "powerful states cast humanity into an era devoid of international rule of law, with civilians paying the highest price".

Powers and other states talk on human rights; not in a committed manner but rather using them as a political weapon in a disruptive and polarised

environment divided into blocs. Some governments call for and demand the implementation of UN recommendations or International Court of Justice rulings or regulations when it falls to adversaries or enemies to act. But they ignore them, and even disparage or attack them, when it concerns action of their own or that of friendly or allied countries and powers. Reactions in relation to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, for instance, are a prime and shameful example. It is so evident that the United Nations secretary-general himself calls it for what it is: he decries the double standards that inhibit the enforceability of the global system's rules and undermine confidence in it. And he recalls that the growing distrust between the Global North and Global South poses a risk to collective security.

As lucidly pointed out in the UN's New Agenda for Peace in 2023, a policy brief drafted by the secretary-general as part of the Our Common Agenda proposal that is to serve to inspire the content of the Summit of the Future, the best tool to prevent armed conflicts is not to dismantle the human rights system but rather to strengthen it. Similarly, the draft of the summit's Pact for the Future and the secretary-general's recommendations make it clear there is an imperative need to incorporate the gender dimension: to take account of the specific impact of violence on women, as well as to enhance and channel the transformative and preventive capital that the empowerment of women and their greater institutional, public and social presence (in diplomatic negotiations and peace processes too) would bring to the advancement and the guarantee of peace.

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF THE MECHANISMS TO CONTROL AND PREVENT THE TRADE IN WEAPONS, AND THE LACK OF INSTRUMENTS AND COMMITMENT ON THE PART OF STATES, FACILITATE A PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS THAT FEEDS ARMED VIOLENCE IN WARS, SOCIAL CONFLICTS AND ORGANISED CRIME.

Arms and (in)security

There is a simplistic idea that associates more weapons with more security, but the evidence keeps telling us otherwise. Two decades of increasing military expenditure, and a booming arms trade, offer a bleak picture in terms of collective, regional and internal security. In the second half of the 20th century, the international system was preoccupied with the regulation and prohibition of weapons of mass destruction (understandably so, given the disasters of Hiroshima and Nagasaki). At the end of the century, however, with the Cold War over and in the conviction that many conflicts were being fought with small arms and light weapons, attention turned to

stopping the growing epidemic of deaths caused by armed violence and its lack of regional and global regulation.

Right now, we must attend to both risks, as stated in the draft of the Pact for the Future. The shortcomings of the mechanisms to control and prevent the trade in weapons for want of instruments and commitment on the part of states regarding them facilitate a proliferation of small arms and light weapons that feeds armed violence in wars, social conflicts and organised crime. Meanwhile, the realisation that the nuclear threat is not a thing of the past but wholly current has set alarm bells ringing. Together, the nine countries in possession of nuclear weapons (five official ones, according to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) – the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom and France – and four unofficial ones – Pakistan, India, Israel and North Korea) have an arsenal of over 12,000 atomic bombs at their disposal. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in its Yearbook 2024, these nine countries continued to modernise their arsenals and some of them deployed new nuclear weapons or nuclear-capable systems. What is most striking, however, is that the number of operational nuclear warheads (deployed on missiles and launch systems) has increased.

THE REMILITARISATION DYNAMICS IN WHICH WE FIND OURSELVES, AND WHICH FEED OFF ONE ANOTHER, LEAD TO SERIOUS NEGLECT OF THE HUGE SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES WE FACE.

States have pivoted significantly against this backdrop of crisis and unease. Rather than look to the international system (the generation of mechanisms of trust and collective security) they are looking inward again, pursuing their geostrategic ambitions (and fears), placing deterrence capability and, in the case of the nuclear powers, nuclear deterrence, at the heart of their defence policies. The risk this shift poses is clear, as the dangers in terms of global security are intensifying. In fact, as the secretary-general said in his Our Common Agenda report, there were more arms control mechanisms during the Cold War than there are now. Apart from arms control, the draft Pact for the Future makes a clear commitment to disarmament and calls for work towards the effective universalisation of the various existing agreements, on both weapons of mass destruction and conventional weapons. It is significant, however, that the secretary-general's report mentions the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), whereas the draft for the summit, which must be approved by the states, talks of "nuclear disarmament" but makes no explicit mention of the TPNW, surely so as not to inconvenience the powers and governments that actively and irresponsibly oppose the agreement.

Another common concern, and one that is covered extensively in the summit draft, is the capacity of new technologies to generate further threats to the security of people and communities. Various UN bodies have already raised the alarm about the proliferation of investment and research by several countries to equip themselves with "killer robots".[1] But the challenges posed by cyberwarfare, the spread of drones and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in weapons systems cause even greater concern regarding their possible impacts on civilians, owing to the lack of effective regulation and gaps, and the difficulties when it comes to establishing accountability for their use, leading to the risk of greater impunity. All the same, it is important to highlight both the determination gathered in the draft to revitalise the role of the United Nations in promoting disarmament (it has certainly kept too low a profile in recent years) and the secretary-general's proposal (mentioned in the New Agenda for Peace) to push for the Security Council to play a more active role in deterrence: not just the use but the threat of use of nuclear weapons.

Disregarded development, a necessary reaction

The establishment of the SDGs in 2015 set out modest measures and gradual advances towards an outlook of fair and sustainable development. While progress was tentative, it has been derailed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza and other factors. The SDGs seem well out of reach. In fact, in 2023 a report by Guterres to the General Assembly on the progress towards the SDGs already mentioned that "many of the SDGs are moderately to severely off track". The Summit of the Future revolves around the profound interdependence between human rights, sustainable development and peace. To a large extent, peace is the outcome of the satisfaction of human rights for all and of the capacity to overcome the climate crisis. And security, beyond a strictly military view, is founded on human beings and on guarantees of survival, freedom and dignity.

The Our Common Agenda report states that trust is a cornerstone of the collective security system. In the absence of trust, states fall back on the basic instinct of guaranteeing their own security, which, being reciprocal, creates more global insecurity. Moreover, the remilitarisation dynamics in which we find ourselves, and which feed off one another, lead to serious neglect of the huge social and environmental challenges we face. Which

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1.   Or lethal autonomous weapons.

is why the secretary-general's pledge to report to ensure that increased military expenditure does not come at the expense of meeting the SDGs is so important. The world is in flames, with peace in tatters, while vectors that are integral to the good health and building of peace are under heavy attack (international law), being pushed back (human rights) or disregarded (sustainable development). Action to remedy the situation is both necessary and urgent, because as the secretary-general points out in the New Agenda for Peace, "what is at stake is not the future of the United Nations, but of our nations and humanity".