

Baha'i International Community Response to the Secretary General's Report,  
'In Larger Freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all'

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The Baha'i International Community welcomes the opportunity to offer comments and observations on the Secretary General's report to the General Assembly titled, 'In Larger Freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all,' in the hopes of stirring further reflection, debate, and action. We understand the processes of UN reform as part of an organic, evolutionary course characterized by increasing levels of integration and unity in governance structures and processes. In this light, we are encouraged by the Report's holistic approach – stressing the interdependence of development, freedom, and peace; emphasizing human solidarity as the basis for effective and sustainable solutions to global challenges; and presenting a bold vision of new mechanisms and methods of work for the Organization. We offer comments on each section of the report in turn.

Freedom from want

□ *Millennium Development Goals* (Paragraphs 28-32).

The Baha'i International Community welcomes the efforts of the United Nations to set forth concrete goals for development, in the form of the MDGs, which seek to focus the work of the organization with the aim of restoring justice and dignity to every human life. Material goals in themselves, however, are not sufficient to inspire and sustain processes of comprehensive development at the local, national and global levels. Equally important are aims to foster universal participation in the development processes, the development of individual capabilities to contribute to these processes, and the application of moral and intellectual resources from the fields of science and religion – two knowledge systems that have propelled our progress over the centuries. Ultimately, each individual, with the benefit of access to education, must be regarded as a protagonist in his or her own development and that of the community.

Alongside the concrete development targets set by the MDGs, it is imperative to attend to the realization of moral or spiritual principles needed for constructive development. At the heart of such principles is the understanding that human nature is essentially spiritual and that a vision of development must be responsive to this reality. These principles may include: fostering unity in diversity, equity, justice, gender equality, moral leadership, and freedom of thought.<sup>1</sup>

Efforts to eradicate poverty must be accompanied by an earnest re-evaluation of global systems and processes - including governance, trade, and the private sector – that perpetuate the growing extremes of wealth and poverty. Specifically, there is a need for strong binding corporate rules at the national and international levels. Greater corporate accountability must not be restricted to the environment and labor standards but must also take into account the full panoply of human rights.

□ *Gender* (Paragraph 40). We strongly support the promotion of gender equality as a prerequisite to development. Emphasis should be placed on the substantive involvement of women at all stages of peace-building and conflict resolution efforts, particularly post-conflict

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<sup>1</sup> Baha'i Publishing Trust. (1998). *Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development*. A concept paper written by the Baha'i International Community for the World Faiths and Development Dialogue at Lambeth Palace, London.

reconstruction. As women are intimately aware of the needs of their families and communities, plans for transition to a peaceful society must include their critical perspectives. Indeed, only as women take their rightful place in decision making at all levels will the moral and psychological climate favorable to the establishment of peace emerge.

### Freedom from fear

The Baha'i International Community welcomes the Report's more comprehensive vision of collective security, based on the understanding that in our interconnected world, a threat to one State is a threat to all. The Baha'i Faith envisions a system of collective security within a framework of global federation, in which national borders have been conclusively defined and in whose favor all nations of the world will have willingly ceded claims to make war.

- ❑ *Definition of terrorism* (Paragraph 91). We support the Secretary General's call for Member States to adopt a definition of terrorism and to conclude a comprehensive convention on terrorism. We agree with the Secretary General's characterization of terrorism as any action, "intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a Government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act." Moreover, problems such as terrorism should be consistently addressed within the context of other issues that disrupt and destabilize society. Nations must look beyond responding separately to disparate problems and move towards the building of a comprehensive international order based on social justice and collective security.
- ❑ *Security Council* (Paragraph 167). We acknowledge the need for urgent reform of the Security Council. The proposals in the Report, however, do not ultimately address the democracy deficit and relentless politicization of the Security Council, which thwart the execution of its duties and undermine the trust and respect it needs to exercise its mandate. To address these deficits, the United Nations must boldly and intelligently move towards adopting a procedure for eventually eliminating permanent membership and veto power.<sup>2</sup>

### Freedom to live in dignity

- ❑ *Responsibility to Protect* (Paragraph 135). We strongly support the "emerging norm of the collective responsibility to protect" and accompanying efforts to establish a principled framework about how and when to intervene justly and effectively to protect human rights. We agree that no legal principle, not even sovereignty, should ever be allowed to shield genocide and human suffering. Indeed, the Baha'i Faith offers the concept of the oneness of humanity as an underlying principle of relations between States. Furthermore, we support the concept of a federated world polity responsive to the needs of an ever-changing world. The aim of such a polity, far from stifling intelligent patriotism or national autonomy, is rather the collective subordination of national impulses to the wider needs of an increasingly interdependent world. The Baha'i Writings assert that, "the earth is but one country and mankind its citizens."
- ❑ *Human Rights*.

- a. Human Rights Council (Paragraphs 181-183)

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<sup>2</sup> Baha'i International Community. (1995). *Turning Point for All Nations*. Baha'i International Community United Nations Office, New York. An interim measure may include not using veto power when voting on questions of genocide or other gross threats to international peace and security.

We support the Secretary General's proposal to elevate the consideration of human rights to the same level accorded to security and socio-economic development. In order to restore the effective functioning of the discredited Human Rights Commission, we support the creation of an elected, standing Human Rights Council and the elaboration of *minimum criteria* for membership. Candidates for membership in the Council should demonstrate strong adherence to human rights standards; specific criteria may include the ratification of key human rights documents or a statement of intent to do so within a given period of time. Members of the Council that repeatedly violate human rights should not be allowed to remain on the Council.

b. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (Paragraphs 142-146)

We agree that OHCHR is ill-equipped to respond effectively to the human rights challenges facing the international community. As such, we support the Secretary General's call for more resources to train country teams within the OHCHR<sup>3</sup> and urge the OHCHR to establish a strong *field presence* at the country level, providing leadership and coordination on matters of promotion and protection of human rights. Second, Special Procedures should receive adequate budgetary and administrative support. Government cooperation with Special Procedures should not be limited to access, but should also include full implementation of recommendations made.<sup>4</sup>

Third, the OHCHR should continue its productive *engagement with NGOs*, which has contributed positively to the work of the Office and to the development of NGO capacity to interact meaningfully in this context.<sup>5</sup> Fourth, the ambitious mandate of the OHCHR must be supported by appropriate budgetary resources.<sup>6</sup> Fifth, the Public Information section of the OHCHR should be developed to allow resolutions of the Commission on Human Rights/Human Rights Council, recommendations of the Special Procedures and concluding observations of the treaty monitoring bodies to be accorded more prominence in the media.

- *Democracy* (Paragraphs 158-151). We commend the Secretary General and the international community for their commitment to democracy and to a freely elected government as a universal value. We support in principle the creation of a democracy fund at the United Nations. At the same time, we note that democracy in its truest sense must be rooted in moral values, intertwined with responsibilities, and concerned with social welfare both within and beyond the nation state. Without this principled anchor, it is vulnerable to the excesses of unbridled individualism and nationalism, which tear at the fabric of the community - both nationally and globally.

Other points for consideration at the Millennium + 5 Summit:

That the Secretary General chose to frame his report in the context of freedoms is significant. Certainly the want of freedom from fear, poverty, and oppression has been a dominant factor in the turmoil of the times. There is no doubt as to the high importance of freedoms to constructive social processes. Yet the freedoms with which we are privileged are concomitant with responsibility – the responsibility to exercise our freedoms in a way that enables all to attain to happiness and to fulfill their purpose in their individual life and in their collective functioning as a society. It is the abuse of freedoms and the denial of responsibilities with which elected and

<sup>3</sup> “In Larger Freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all,” Report of the Secretary General, Para. 142. UN Document A/59/2005.

<sup>4</sup> The OHCHR should take steps to bolster interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteurs. The dialogues should include Member States' reports on the status of implementation of recommendations.

<sup>5</sup> Similarly, NGO involvement in the work of the proposed Human Rights Council should not be diminished.

<sup>6</sup> The core functions of the Office should be independent of voluntary contributions. Governments should decrease the percentage of earmarked funds, according more latitude to the Office in determining its needs.

appointed officials at both national and international levels have been vested that must remain at the forefront of deliberations about United Nations reform.

- ❑ *Freedom of religion or belief.* The Secretary General's report does not make mention of one of the central and most challenging issues shaping inter and intra-State relations today, namely the freedom of religion or belief. At a time when religious extremism, intolerance, and discrimination are threatening peace and security in many parts of the world, it is imperative for the United Nations to address this issue openly and earnestly. Until all people are free to openly practice and share their beliefs within the parameters of equally applied laws, as well as change their religion or belief system, development and peace will prove elusive.
- ❑ *Condemning religious extremism and terrorism.* While the United Nations' human rights machinery has been used to condemn religious intolerance and persecution, United Nations development policies and programs have barely begun to address religious extremism as a major obstacle to peace and well-being. Hesitancy to acknowledge and forcefully condemn the religious extremism motivating terrorist acts weakens the effectiveness of the UN's efforts to bring an end to international terrorism. Only by identifying and understanding the motivation behind such acts can they be effectively combated.

We are grateful for the opportunity to submit the above comments. The Baha'i International Community looks forward to being engaged in the debate and implementation of proposed reforms, with a view to creating a United Nations capable of meeting the changing needs and growing aspirations of the generality of humankind.