

Talking of Peace in Peacetime

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Gathering in San Juan, Puerto Rico in August 2002 to discuss prospects of peace, one wondered if the hundreds of people participating in the international conference had come in peacetime to discuss peace - or was it to discuss peace in wartime? Organized by the Puerto Rican authorities and the Arias foundation, the conference included artists, economists, political scientists, peace activists, writers, poets, actors and singers from different parts of the world in their common search for peace at a time when the world was perhaps inching towards a long cycle of conflict.

The conference was both an experience and an experiment. Unlike conferences where people are brought together from the same discipline to discuss and debate issues, this was an introduction to perceptions and sensitivities of people from various fields regarding their understanding of both conflict and peace. The undercurrent of the discussion during the two and a half days was that there was a common thread or a linkage amongst the agonies of people from different parts of the world, that excessive militarization and governmental concern with military security had tended to force the greater issue of human security to a tiny corner from where it needs to be retrieved and put on the center screen. One idea was to produce a "Declaration of Puerto Rico" demanding restraint by governments, that they not destabilize world security.

Nonetheless, one left the conference feeling that there was some unfinished business: the task of agreeing on small but concrete measures in different parts of the world that could bring the people closer to their ultimate objective of greater peace. Being from a region fraught with conflict and the threat of war, perhaps what I had sought was to use the event to build connections that could help solve specific problems.

Could people from opposing sides of the divide in different regions have built an understanding they could have taken home and used to build new bridges? Incidentally, the only sub-region that could claim an almost full representation was the Indian Subcontinent. Unfortunately, the meeting was but a lost opportunity for these people to build a better understanding. Similarly, while the militarism in the world, especially the Bush administration's obsession with a stronger military posture, came under a lot of criticism, the participants seemed lost to think of ways to surge ahead in finding means to convey their desire to the establishments of their respective countries regarding the common human goal for finding peace in a peaceful way.

The real question the conference posed to participants was how to bridge the communication gap between governments and the people's perception of peace, how one starts to change the way that security has traditionally been defined. Clearly, there is an urgent need to rethink and redefine the traditional security paradigm and make the national security structures and policies more responsive to the basic search for human security. As long as security continues to be interpreted as a service normally delivered by strong armed forces, there is little progress to expect in bringing peace and stability to the world. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the conference was that it left the participants with the most formidable question of how to team up and devise ways to change the course of the discourse on security.

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