The century of violence and the way forward

Author: Dr Ronald McCoy
Date: 1998

Introduction
For physicians, the twentieth century will stand out as a bittersweet century of contrasts. While we have witnessed unimaginable advances in medicine that have made it possible to save lives in ways undreamt of before, we were also witnesses of deadly conflict and human atrocities that have made this century the most violent and bloody century in history. There has also been a deadly paradox in the political and social history of the twentieth century. On the one hand, there is universal recognition of human rights, including the right to life, embodied in a remarkable array of international human rights and humanitarian laws. Yet, on the other hand, human rights and humanitarian law have been violated on a massive scale by the savagery of warfare, with weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear, chemical, biological and high-tech conventional weapons, giving warfare an inhumane dimension.

World Wars
Two world wars in the first half of the century decimated populations worldwide. The First World War claimed the lives of nine million soldiers, sailors and airmen. On the battlefield, trench warfare, with the use of the machine gun, massed artillery, poison gas, and the introduction of the tank, gave land war a searing, new dimension. In the air, the advent of the bomber brought civilians face to face with the full horrors of modern war. At sea, the submarine disrupted trade and threatened whole societies with starvation. Twenty million people suffered serious injury and another twenty million suffered long-term psychological damage. There were five million widows and nine million orphans.

The Second World War, the most costly in history, took the lives of fifty million people. Yet, combatants accounted for less than seventeen million of these deaths. The high proportion of civilian casualties meant that it was truly a total war. Armed forces, deployed on land, at sea and in the air, with a whole new generation of deadly weapons, indulged in strategies that did not discriminate between civilian and military populations, with both sides abandoning the laws of armed conflict. The Luftwaffe attempted to bomb British civilians into submission with the Blitz on London and Coventry. The RAF and the US Army Air Force reciprocated with the bombings of Hamburg, Dresden and Tokyo. Genocide was sanctioned, the Holocaust was perpetrated, and six million Jews were exterminated. The final defining outrage of the twentieth century was the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atom bombs.

The Cold War
After the unparalleled horrors of the Second World War, hope was invested in the United Nations, established in 1945 “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” Once again, hope and good intentions were not enough. The Cold War intervened and triggered a nuclear arms race.

In the so-called Cold War, more than one hundred proxy wars engulfed Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, killing more than twenty million people. Europe escaped lightly with conflicts in Cyprus, Northern Ireland and Yugoslavia.
The great majority of the millions who perished in these wars were not killed by bombs, tanks or fighter aircraft but by small arms and light weapons, such as rifles, pistols, rocket-propelled grenades and anti-personnel landmines, supplied by countries that continue to prosper from the sale of arms.

We were fortunate that Mikhail Gorbachev appeared on the scene in 1985. His commitment to non-violence caused a revolution in world affairs in the late 1980s, when he withdrew Soviet forces and support for client states in Central Europe and launched a peace offensive with glasnost and perestroika. The subsequent collapse of communism and the imposition of the Soviet Union brought the Cold War to an end, but unstable conditions in the successor states have now spawned an entirely new and dangerous phenomenon—organised criminal enterprises, mafias and cartels that terrorise and murder opponents. Without being alarmist, it is not inconceivable that these groups may acquire nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction from a disintegrating Russian military establishment and sell them on the open market or use them to intimidate or blackmail any city in the world.

**Post-Cold War**

The end of the Cold War lifted the threat of a global nuclear war, but it was followed immediately by two of the most horrendous crimes since Hiroshima and Nagasaki—the attempted genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda. Post-Cold War euphoria soon evaporated with the realisation that humankind’s capacity for murder remains undiminished.

Fifty years after the death of Hitler, Slobodan Milosevic unleashed the same Nazi-like hatred upon Yugoslavia, where thousands of Croats, Bosnian Muslims and ethnic Albanians have been murdered and driven from their homes. In Rwanda, the Hutu government embarked on a policy to kill every Tutsi in the country and succeeded in massacring 800,000 people. Prior to this, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge exterminated 25 per cent (almost 2 million) of the Cambodian population in the late 1970s.

Most conflicts today are internal wars between ethnic and sectarian groups, while wars between nations are usually caused by territorial disputes, ideological differences, national liberation struggles, a lust for conquest and power, or occasionally by diplomatic incompetence.

Latent conflicts continue to fester and uneasy truces remain in the Korean peninsula, the Middle East, the Balkans and South Asia. Running through a number of these conflicts is the theme of foreign intervention and the culture of militarism. The harsh reality is that war remains primarily an instrument of politics in the hands of wilful leaders, aided by the profit-driven merchants of death in the arms trade.

Nevertheless, there are a few instances of a conscious rejection of past hatreds. After centuries of war, Europe is coalescing into the European Union. Another good example is South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which pleads for “the need for understanding but not for vengeance... for reparation but not for retaliation ... for humanity but not for victimisation.” The Commission will be a lasting tribute to the courage and vision of a remarkable human being—Nelson Mandela, who embodies forgiveness and reconciliation..

While the Bolshevik era and the collapse of communism are being interpreted by historians, some questions about the Cold War will continue to be debated, including the central question of the strategic balance between East and West, enforced by the doctrine of nuclear deterrence and mutual assured destruction.
Nuclear Weapons

As physicians, we unconditionally reject the indiscriminate violence and the inhumanity of nuclear weapons. Although the nightmare of a global nuclear war has been lifted, deliverance from nuclear war will be incomplete as long as the nuclear weapon states continue to base their security on the threat and use of nuclear weapons.

The continued reliance on nuclear weapons and the policy of first use, the absence of undertakings by most nuclear weapon states not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states, and the maintenance of five thousand nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert all pose unacceptable and unnecessary risks.

Human folly and diplomatic fallibility have occasionally proved disastrous in the past. The Arab-Israeli Six-Day War, the Falkland Islands War and the Gulf War fall into that category. Another near disaster was the Cuban missile crisis, which could be described as a dangerous game of Russian roulette with nuclear weapons that was stopped in time. We may not be so lucky again.

The possibility of an accidental or unauthorised launch of nuclear weapons is ever present. The insecure storage of Russian nuclear weapons and material also increases the risk of a terrorist nuclear attack.

Nothing is inevitable until it has actually happened, but there is one statistical certainty. Any event that has a definite probability, however small, that does not decrease with time, will eventually occur. With nuclear weapons that threaten civilisation, we have a duty to make that probability vanish.

The argument for nuclear deterrence is largely a circular one and has been completely demolished by the Canberra Commission. The destructiveness of nuclear weapons is so great and so indiscriminate that they have no military use whatsoever. The only apparent military use that remains for nuclear weapons is in deterring their use by others. That usefulness implies the continued existence of nuclear weapons. Therefore they would have no use at all if nuclear weapons were eliminated.

The claim that nuclear weapons are needed to deter the threat or use of chemical and biological weapons is greatly overstated and profoundly suspect. The nuclear weapon states, particularly the United States, have such overwhelming conventional weapons, which are in effect weapons of mass destruction, that they are capable of deterring such threats with conventional weapons alone. It is unfortunate that, until we redefine security and put in place effective mechanisms for conflict prevention, the threat or use of force will be needed occasionally to face down aggressive leaders.

Nuclear Disarmament

Ridding the world of nuclear weapons is now a realistic political goal. What is missing is the political will. A decade after the end of the Cold War, more than 30,000 nuclear warheads continue to menace the world. The grim reality is that the nuclear weapon states are not fulfilling their moral and legal obligations, made explicit in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, the report of the Canberra Commission, and the statements of military and civilian leaders.

More significantly, it must be recognised that the CTBT does not ban nuclear test explosions as comprehensively as we would like it to, for it allows "sub-critical" explosions and inertial confinement fusion explosions, as well as computer simulations,
Medical Association for Prevention of War www.mapw.org.au
Dr Ronald McCoy: The Century Of Violence And The Way Forward

as part of the deceptive Stockpile Stewardship and Maintenance Program. In other words, new nuclear weapons are still being designed and vertical proliferation continues to thrive in weapons laboratories, which could trigger another nuclear arms race. In my view, of the five nuclear powers, the United States is the circuit breaker but continues to be the main obstacle to abolition.

In our zeal to abolish nuclear weapons, there is a danger that conventional disarmament may be neglected. It should not be forgotten that nuclear arsenals, particularly that of the United States, are being supplemented by an increasingly large arsenal of increasingly destructive high-tech conventional weapons and missiles.

The nuclear tests by India and Pakistan were a regrettable but not entirely unexpected development, born of frustration and desperation. They are a wake-up call to the international community that nuclear non-proliferation is unsustainable without complete nuclear disarmament. We have a clear choice: nuclear abolition or a nuclear free-for-all.

Middle Powers and Civil Society

It is clear that nuclear disarmament is not a matter only for the governments of the nuclear powers, but also for the governments of the middle powers as well as non-governmental organisations.

In April 1995, during the NPT Review and Extension Conference in New York, activists from around the world formed a global network, called Abolition 2000, which calls for an agreement, by the year 2000, to negotiate a nuclear weapons convention that requires the phased elimination of nuclear weapons within a time-bound framework, with provisions for effective verification and enforcement.

In March 1998, IPPNW joined with six other international citizen organisations and launched a carefully focused campaign, called the Middle Powers Initiative (MPI), to mobilise key middle power states to engage and persuade the leaders of the five nuclear weapon states to break free from their Cold War mindset and move rapidly to a nuclear weapon-free world, which is now feasible, verifiable and abundantly desired by the international community.

The idea of such an initiative was inspired by the success of the Ottawa Process and the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, initiated by the government of Canada with the dedicated grassroots support of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

In June 1998, the Foreign Ministers of eight middle powers—Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Slovenia, South Africa and Sweden—spontaneously pre-empted the initiative when they issued a Declaration calling for a new agenda for the elimination of nuclear weapons, based on the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

The New Agenda Coalition has since tabled a resolution which was voted on and adopted in the First Committee for Disarmament in the United Nations on 13 November 1998, with 97 in favour, 19 against and 32 abstentions. It is significant that those abstaining included China and 12 member states of NATO.

The abstentions by 12 NATO countries were a significant defeat for the three Western nuclear powers who campaigned hard against the resolution in NATO capitals and elsewhere. The abstentions appear to be the beginning of a challenge to NATO’s continued policy of nuclear deterrence which will come under scrutiny when NATO’s
Strategic Concept is reviewed. The controversy over Germany’s position on NATO’s policy of first use also suggests that the North Atlantic winds of change are blowing.

These are encouraging signs of a more balanced multipolar world now that influential middle powers are beginning to be concerned about the behaviour of the nuclear weapon states, including US plans to convert NATO into “an alliance of interests”, extending beyond the defence of Europe to include far-flung activities such as countering chemical and biological weapons, nuclear proliferation or terrorism. This would effectively globalise NATO.

**Prevention of War**

The twentieth century has proven that governments on their own often fail to prevent or resolve violent conflict. So, if we are to avoid the mistakes of the past, a citizens’ ‘multi-track’ system of conflict management must complement the diplomatic efforts of governments.

Just as in the practice of medicine, preventing the outbreak, spread and recurrence of the deadly disease of war requires timely interventions, with the right combination of political, economic, social and military measures.

The need to prevent war becomes increasingly urgent as population growth threatens to outstrip resources and increasingly destructive weapons of war continue to proliferate. To undertake prevention, the international community must commit to a preventive regime of disarmament and arms control and agree to submit to a body of international law to regulate the behaviour of nation states and limit the excesses of national sovereignty.

Although they do not make conflict inevitable, there are numerous forces propelling people into conflict. The international community therefore has to address the root causes and conditions that make societies prone to conflict - poverty and economic inequalities, corrupt, repressive and illegitimate regimes and leaders, failure to protect human rights, historic inter-group tensions, urban migration and overcrowding, ethnic or group discrimination, religious communities who espouse aggressive and divisive policies, legacies of colonialism including the marginalisation of indigenous populations, the role of the media in glorifying violence, the absence of democratic institutions of global governance, environmental degradation and diminishing natural resources such as water and arable land, burgeoning populations, mountains of armaments, and threatening regional relationships. When such grievances are exploited by self-seeking leaders, the scene is set for war.

To be successful, prevention will depend upon the prompt recognition of early warning signs, such as widespread human rights abuses, increasingly brutal political oppression, inflammatory use of the media, the acquisition of arms, and sometimes a rash of organised political killings. States, international organisations, non-governmental organisations, the business community, religious and scientific groups, and the media all have a capacity for early warning, although the problem often is less one of early warning than early action, as in Bosnia and Rwanda.

Preventive diplomacy also encompasses the proper use of sanctions and inducements.

When preventive diplomacy, including Track Two diplomacy, fails to prevent the outbreak of hostilities, it is essential to prevent the spread and escalation of hostilities by using political and diplomatic means. Occasionally, the threat or use of force may be
required to curb much greater violence, while observing strict criteria for force deployment and ensuring clear objectives and mandates, and a strong likelihood of success.

When hostilities have ceased, it is essential to secure a peace settlement and create conditions that will prevent a recurrence of hostilities, by reducing tensions and integrating former adversaries into a more cohesive political and economic community.

In the long term, it would be more productive to visualise prevention not simply as the passive avoidance of undesirable outcomes, but more as an active fashioning of a preferred, sustainable environment for peace, characterised by an effective arms control and disarmament regime, viable countries with representative governments sustained by the rule of law and a vigorous civil society, the norm of economic cooperation leading to vibrant economies with social safety nets, and a regime for the resolution of disputes.

These measures would require the participation of all the stakeholders - leaders and governments, and the many elements of the international community, such as the United Nations, regional organisations, non-governmental organisations, the business community, the scientific community, educational and religious institutions, and the media, which would contribute to a dialogue and a pervasive new way of thinking.

New thinking must be cultivated to address the issues of geopolitics, cultural and civilisational differences, unjust international financial institutions, historic problems of aggression and desperate acts of terrorism, the hegemonic behaviour of strong powers and the vulnerabilities of small nations which are now threatened with the creeping economic colonialism of transnational corporations in a globalised economy, the special responsibilities of democratic states and the importance of leadership, the unfulfilled potential of the powerful media, the shared frailty and fallibility of human nature, the significance of individual and group rights, and the necessity to build a worldwide culture of peace and conflict prevention that will shape decent human interaction at every level.

The prevention of war over the long term is too difficult and costly, technically and politically, to be the responsibility of any one institution or government, no matter how powerful. Responsibility and burdens must be shared, and strengths and resources pooled to ensure a truly civilised world.

**Culture of Peace and Conflict Prevention**

Beyond persuasion and coercion, it is so important to develop a culture of peace and conflict prevention. Taught in secular and religious schools, emphasised by the media, and pursued vigorously by the United Nations and other international organisations, this culture should become a necessary qualification for leadership in the 21st century.

In the next century, human survival may well depend on our ability to learn to adapt to a new behaviour, where inter-group competition is largely replaced by cooperation and mutual understanding. Such an adaptation would struggle to survive in today's environment of market forces that sanction individualism and greed.

We must ensure that it is not too late to develop a radically new outlook on human relations and learn not to threaten or beggar our neighbour. The challenge will be to change inter-group behaviour with its propensity to distinguish and discriminate between in-groups and out-groups and to make harsh distinctions between "us" and "them." The disturbing reality today is that otherness, the simple fact of being different
in some way, perpetuates the problems of exclusion and alienation of peoples, which power the cycle of violence.

We must strengthen research in child development to better understand the causes of prejudice and intolerance to help us achieve a deeper understanding of human behaviour that bears upon the ultimate problems of war and peace, so that people of humane persuasion will cooperate to build workable institutions for global governance, such as a reformed, democratic United Nations and a strengthened International Court of Justice.

*United Nations*

No longer a hostage to Cold War divisions, the United Nations can be an essential focal point for marshalling the resources and goodwill of the international community to help prevent war and lay the foundations for lasting peace.

However, the UN is only as effective as its members allow it to be. Coming up frequently against governments’ concerns to protect their national sovereignty from intrusion, the UN will need to be strengthened and reformed, if it is to play a more central role.

While there is almost universal agreement to the principle of enlarging the UN Security Council, so that its membership reflects the world of today rather than 1945, there is no consensus on how to accomplish this or on how to address the imbalance conferred by the veto powers of the five permanent members, so as to strengthen its credibility, legitimacy and capacity for conflict prevention.

*International Law*

The emerging primacy of international law is an important development in international relations. Although the role of human rights and humanitarian laws in international relations has always been limited, it is rarely insignificant. Its function in structuring the international system has been enhanced because of the increasing global interdependence of states. While the enforcement of international law is clearly weaker than national law and needs to be strengthened, it still provides relevant terms of legal reference for the conduct of states in their international relations, based on their membership of an existing international community.

In July 1998, a landmark treaty was negotiated by 148 states in Rome which established a permanent International Criminal Court and an independent prosecutor for the protection of human rights. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which will enter into force when 60 countries ratify it, is a major breakthrough in reinforcing the principles of Nuremberg. It will hold individual violators, including leaders and heads of states, accountable for the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression.

Among the seven states that voted against it (China, Iraq, Israel, Libya, Qatar, the United States and Yemen), the US unsuccessfully sought veto powers so that US military personnel would be exempted from prosecution by the International Criminal Court. The vast majority of countries rebuffed the US when it insisted that the Court’s jurisdiction be limited by a guarantee that no American citizen would ever be tried before it, although the treaty included sufficient protection for citizens of countries with well established legal systems. When a few countries set themselves apart and justify their policies and actions in a global mythology of exceptionalism, cooperation for peace becomes difficult.
Conclusion
The way forward to a peaceful world is long, tortuous and arduous. The end of the Cold War is a historic opportunity to advance the causes of human rights, democratic governance and disarmament, and to invest all available resources in preventive strategies and establish global norms for the behaviour of states and their leaders, underpinned by international law.

There can be no new global order without a new global ethic, in which we all have a responsibility for a better world and to be involved in the struggle for human rights, freedom, justice, equity, peace and the preservation of our planet. Our different religions and cultural traditions must not prevent us from opposing all forms of inhumanity or from working together to ensure that every human being will be treated humanely. To this end, we must be committed to a culture of non-violence and the sanctity of life.

Despite the litany of violence this century, some achievements provide a compelling basis for hope, such as the decline of tyranny and the expansion of representative and responsive government, the protection of human rights, and the promotion of social justice and economic well-being. Imperfect and incomplete though they are, we must extend and build upon these achievements in the next century, if we are to lessen the destructiveness and violence of humankind.