



**Activating Nonviolence – IX UNPO General Assembly
16 May 2008, European Parliament, Brussels, Belgium**

“Gandhian Nonviolent Civil Resistance”

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What I am going to do, looking at the time now, is to give you my remarks on the issue of nonviolence. Basically I want to speak on the issues of succeeding with nonviolence in an increasingly violent environment. After my intervention we will have some twenty minutes to have some discussion on the issue of nonviolence and maybe ask some questions before we go to the next part [of the General Assembly] which deals with the issue of regional autonomies and federalism in the context of internal self-determination. So that we do not lose the discussion on either of these, as I said, the point I wanted to interact with you is basically on this question of how to succeed with nonviolence in an increasingly violent environment.

My view is that, the quest for rights has been a whole history of struggles by themselves. Because, as you know, there are declarations and laws that have been made, but none of these have given rights to peoples themselves. What has given rights to people have been the struggles of peoples. So that becomes the enduring thing and that focus on which, I think it was a French philosopher, who said several years ago that when he goes to a country, he doesn't ask what the laws in their books are, he goes to ask: How are the laws in the books implemented? Because, you always get them [the laws], even in the worse dictatorships. If you go through their law books you will see very brilliant laws that, if implemented, will confer some rights on peoples. So, the whole idea of the quest for rights has always been an enduring story of struggles. So what do we use, what system do we use? The nonviolence that we talk about, although it was brought into focus by Gandhi, and I mean no other person has propagated and lived it as Gandhi, and several others following him, Martin Luther King, the Dalai Lama and several others. But if you look at it, it [nonviolence] has been with us almost from creation. Almost all the Scriptures that I know of oppose violence, in anything that they are saying, they want their fellows not to do that. But even then, there is always violence that we see all through the time.

The international community, including the UNPO, is always engaged in the prevention of conflicts and at the same time the promotion of peaceful realization of legitimate rights including that of self-determination and democracy. So we are asking for self-determination, but we are also saying: let it be by nonviolent means. All the international organizations, if you look through their covenants and declarations that is what we've been saying. And somehow, you may ask whether they mean the same thing.

I am not going to worry myself about trying to define what I call nonviolence, that might be something that the experts and the academics might deal with. Clearly what we will need in the general way we look at it, is what technique can we use in conflicts which oppose violence, which brings to the question again: what do we call violence? Do we use it only to refer to as physical violence? Does it not include maybe environmental violence? Does it not

include political violence? Or even psychological violence? In my view, I think all of them should be included, because it doesn't matter if someone is killed by a bullet, by a knife, or by pollution, or even by starvation. So, I think that in this context I would like all to be put together, because in today's world, the definition of what is violence, or even what is force, is becoming more and more subjective. You hear people say, even those who say they promote violence come on television and tell us that the strategy they are going to use is to 'shock and awe' and the whole world applauds that. Shock what? Shock the plants? Shock human beings? Or to awe what? So clearly I think that we need to look at those things.

But I thought again that we should also look at the question of some of the things that might help the success of the nonviolent approach, which is the absence of violence. There are several, but my own experience tells me that there are some that we need to look at, and the first I will look at is internal. Sometimes it will be born out of the belief system of the people, like the Buddhists which encourages the nonviolent approach. They believe that you do not need to do that [resort to violent protest]. When we were starting the Ogoni struggle, one of the things that implored us to look for the nonviolent approach was our belief system. Our people believe that once you spill blood in a struggle that you are not likely to succeed, that you have polluted what would have made you succeed. So the belief system can help in the adoption [of a nonviolent form of protest].

Sometimes the sheer fact of the odds against you can also force on you the nonviolent approach. I may not be an expert in this, but you have a small group that is pitched against a very formidable enemy, against which you don't stand a chance; you have about 1 million people pitched against China. Clearly, you start thinking of yourself: why use any other means apart from the nonviolent means? So the practicality of the situation can also force that on you.

But again, I think that there is something else which I try to draw from all the success stories if you like, of the nonviolent movement, and that is what I call a disciplined and charismatic leadership. There will be somebody that people can look on who will say: stop. And people will stop. If you don't have [one], you have Gandhi. In these days you have Martin Luther King; you have the Dalai Lama. And in fact I have been reading an article in the paper, I think it was Time Magazine and it was asking the leadership question to the Dalai Lama, I think that's when he [the Dalai Lama] said: 'look, if this continues, I'll quit.' And the Time Magazine editor was like: 'wait a minute, don't quit yet, because if you go, it's going to create problems.' I mean you can see frustration in the fear that people have, that if you lose that sort of leadership you are going to have a real problem. So you need that sort of leadership in order to support the nonviolent approach.

I think again that, in addition to this, there are several external factors. These are the things that bring out the challenges, which I think is the most important point I want to bring up. When we talk about the external factors, things that do not need to be with the people, every person who goes into nonviolence or any struggle, one of the things you want is to attract attention. You want people to know of your problem. That's one of your first goals, so if you are ignored, that's a minus for the problem. If you do not get the visibility, you get into trouble. So you need some people to get some attention, and attention not in terms of people looking at you, attention in terms of you want the other side to be able to say: 'look there's a problem out here.' And I think that the political system in which it is being practised can also be one of the things that will help, whether to swing the balance one way or the other. Let me explain what I mean. If those were in a system where maybe the government is quite representative, such that it's democratic in some sense, not in the sense of which Marco was saying, but let's use it in a loose, general sense of being democratic. [Or] if you are going to do nonviolence in a system where the government of the state does not tolerate civil disobedience, if they don't depend on your votes, they don't depend on anything, then why should they listen to you?

It [the external factor] might also be economic, in the sense that they depend on the means of their sustainers. It does not depend on their taxes. I mean in our case in Nigeria, the whole country is run on oil and gas, so the government is not serious about people paying taxes. And in my view it's deliberate in the sense that they don't want people to be able to hold them to ransom because you can withdraw paying taxes and the government will collapse and listen to you: 'why am I losing my much needed revenue?.' But [if] you are just picking up oil from somewhere, it doesn't matter. So your activities could be different if maybe it [the state] were [reliant on] taxes, or even agricultural things. But I do not see, in countries which are dependent on some of this and that, [and] do not depend on the will, I mean the economy that does not depend on the will of the people, it can be a challenge in trying to get the requisite attention that we require.

But [as] I said, one thing that is most important [and] which we must draw a line under is visibility. Most people use nonviolence in their struggle. You want attention. You want concessions. You want people to take you seriously. You want that attention. You want people to take that issue - that it is quite critical. That is the whole thing about the struggle. But, you can now find that, most times, what gets attention is the opposite of those sorts of views. And I have sometimes felt even a little bit scandalized, that in our own case, let's say in the Ogoni case, many of you will have seen on television there are fringes of people in my region in Nigeria, who are taking to arms. Almost all the time, they use our own struggle as a reason to go to the violent option. And they say: 'look, you started nonviolence, you didn't do anything and they killed you. They killed your leader [Ken Saro-Wiwa], they executed all the people, so why should we wait to be killed by using those tactics?'

That has become one of the things that I think we need to watch out for, because if you look [at] what gets attention most times, it is not the activities, not the marches. Let's take the Burmese example, for instance. Their leader Aung San Suu Kyi has been in house arrest for several years. She's won the Nobel Peace Prize. And what are the concessions? If you ask many people now: 'what do you remember about Burma apart from the recent cyclone?' They will tell you about the monks' protest and the execution of those monks, [and] the violence that the state perpetrated on them. So that is the thing that people now look at and say: 'wait a minute, oh there's some problem there.' And not just for people, even the United Nations. That was the time that [Professor Ibrahim] Gambari was sent as, the Special envoy of the UN Secretary General to go and intercede. As soon as the violence subsides, I am not sure whether Gambari still goes to Burma, or whether that conversation is still going on.

If you look also in the case of the Tibetans, for several years they have conducted an impressive nonviolent struggle that has been the envy of every person around the globe. Even sometimes, with the concessions they have made, you must say it has been so profound in the sense that they even renounced their right to sovereignty. And many people felt: 'this is going to the extreme.' But it was the violence attached to the protest of the people in the capital of Tibet that got people's attention. It is that that started people believing for the first time that perhaps we can picket the Olympic Torch. Perhaps we can do certain things. And for the first time, I hear, I read, I pick up the news that: 'oh well, the Chinese government said well we need to talk with the representative of the Dalai Lama', not because of the peaceful nature of the campaigns, but because violence had been occasioned.

Some of these have been one of the things that worry people who are practitioners of nonviolence. And so you find that most people are now saying: we are resorting to violence to attract attention, because that is what gets the attention of the media. That's what gets the attention of governments. That's what gets the attention of everybody else. And that becomes something far more profound in this world, where after 9/11 the whole issue of terrorism has assumed a very peculiar and subjective definition. And someone told me that terrorism is now defined as that which maybe one or two countries see as being terrorism. And that is just what terrorism is, so if it is not seen by them as terrorism, then that is it.

So clearly, that has put a lot of stress on this [nonviolent] quest, and you can see the embarrassing situation that subjectivity has led to of recent, when, I think it was couple of months ago, I saw that the United States Congress were struggling to see how to remove the name of [Nelson] Mandela from the list of terrorists. And you now find here: 'wait a minute, so this guy is still a terrorist up until the year of 2008?'. He has won the Nobel Peace Prize. He has visited the United States several times. Technically he is not supposed to get a visa to the United States, so they are now thinking: 'Oh, can we change it for the purposes of our face?'

This subjectivity in all this also does pose a serious challenge to the issues of nonviolence. I was just talking to a friend way back home in Nigeria about this subjectivity and he said: 'Well, I have no problem.' He told me the story of how he was travelling between Port Harcourt to Lagos. That is some 8 hours by road. It could be dangerous but they were doing the trip at night and they were going in a big bus. And then about 2am at night, they met some armed robbers that stopped them on the road. They got into the vehicle and said that all women should come out, and so all the women came out. And there was a man who was sitting at the back, who followed the women and tried to go out. And they said: 'Look my friend, we said only women should go out, why are you coming out?' He said: 'That's actually the problem, every time I see you guys I am a woman, so I have decided to be a woman for the cause, because I see armed robbers, how can I be a man when I am in this sort of a situation?'

Once people want to do something, you change the rules for the purposes of getting something done, and that has become one of the problems that is now affecting, or afflicting even, the success if you like of the nonviolent movement. So, the international community, at one point says: 'Well, we support nonviolence.' I was reading through the papers we got yesterday from the European Union Report on the Human Rights Policy, the one they gave us, and I looked at Paragraph 9. It states that nonviolence is the most appropriate means of ensuring the fundamental human rights are enjoyed, upheld, promoted, and respected to the full; believes that this promotion should constitute a priority objective in EU human rights and democracy policy and intends to contribute to keeping up-to-date with and studying modern nonviolent theory and practice, partly through a comparative analysis of the best practise used in the past; proposes with a view to bring in this idea a central political role that the European Conference on nonviolence be convened in 2009 and that 2010 be designated the European Year of Nonviolence; calls on Member States to endeavour on the auspices of the United Nations to ensure that the decades of nonviolence 2010 to 2020 is proclaimed.

Now, I have no problem with that. That's a good recognition. But I think what one will expect from countries is not the question of acknowledging what we already know, that nonviolence is the preferred option, but now making it an imperative that dialog must be held with all those who are practitioners of nonviolence. That is what will make it work. That is what will encourage other people to work. But if they have been ignored and we proclaim that this is nonviolence, we want nonviolence, and yet what attracts attention is the violent option. We are unwittingly saying, that is what is a preferred option that we need to do.

And I think that one of the things which we should do is highlight the responsibility of the global community. The global community must be able to put their money where their mouth is. They must be prepared to say they want to support and be seen to actually support and promote the nonviolent option. As soon as we leave all these blank spaces and we do not recognize and engage the process of nonviolence, we find ourselves unwittingly supporting the other side. Unless it can be demonstrated that nonviolence can endorse work towards the achievement of goals as well as providing recognition of issues of identity, the chances are that an increasing number of movements will turn to violence.

We as a global community, have two choices. We can either continue focusing attention on violent action and reactions to current or political conflict situations and see a continued

increase in violent conflict, or we practise what we all say we believe in: peaceful, nonviolent change. That is what the global community needs to do, but for ourselves also. We must appreciate that, sometimes we need to be focused on the goals of the struggle, because sometimes when you lose the sight of the goal we start to react to reaction and that pushes us away from that very point where we were. Most times it is a reaction that gets people to rear from nonviolence. This state has now inflicted violence on a peaceful protest, so what we do? We want to show also that we are men, so we do something. That becomes a reaction. That is the one that people listen to. And that diverts us from this, so I think it is imperative that we also need to get focused and disciplined so that we do not allow the reaction that follows our nonviolent action to derail us from where we are supposed to go.

Secondly, we also must be able to celebrate our own successes in nonviolence. How many times have we sorted each other out and say this is the goal we should all follow? Most times, we only react if we hear that people have been killed. I think that is the time that we remember that there is a struggle by ourselves, so unwittingly we, who are promoters of the struggle, are also encouraging the violent option because we will only issue statements when people are killed in Tibet. So we now say, let's issue a statement of solidarity. But the Tibetans have a day, an international day for their struggle. It goes without our response. We do not show that we appreciate these things.

So we must also do those things that we want others to do unto us, by trying to recognize and associate and give visibility to some of the things that we say represent the nonviolence that we preach. I think that it will be important that above all, we should know that, whether you have the belief or not, that once the struggle gets into the violent terrain it comes most times with unpredictable results. That it even can consume any person. That is the point that we must try to avoid. And that is the point that I thought we should leave here with. So we must focus our minds to all this and agree that there's so much attention been paid to the violent strategies. I have been confronted several times, they asked me: 'The Ogoni people - we don't hear from you again, are you still active?' And I ask: 'When, what did you hear about the Ogoni struggle?' And they say: 'It's the execution of Ken [Saro Wiwa]', which is the violent thing that happened to us. So that's what people remember. And I ask: does that mean you are waiting for another execution before you know that something is happening?

So, clearly, let us know that, once violence steps in, the results cannot be predicted and if we have this as a focus of what it is, it might help stabilize us in the path which we have chosen to go, which is the path of nonviolence which we think is the preferred option. And that is the message I thought I should leave you with. Thank you.