

The Current World Economic Crisis and its Significance for the Peace Movement

I would like to thank my hosts for inviting me to attend this important conference and for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts with you on this important subject. Let me begin by asking what do we mean by peace? What kind of peace do we need to strive for?

1. Peace by Satisfaction

Not, I would say, the dominant ideas of how peace is to be secured. These are the notions of peace by equilibrium – that provided by balance of power; or imperial peace that comes from direct domination as in the tributary empires or colonialism of the past; nor a hegemonic peace which is a more informal and consensual form of accepting imperial domination; nor peace by terror – the claims for the virtues of deterrence presumably provided by nuclear weapons, themselves rightly characterized as weapons of terror. Those who hold these views would claim to be pragmatic and therefore sensible realists and believe that peace, security and justice cannot in any truly significant way move forwards in tandem but that there must always be basic and quite significant trade-offs between them. So, they would say, settle for global order to be provided by those states that are most powerful even if inevitably self-serving and sometimes hypocritical and immoral in their behaviour. This is the way of the world.

What we need to strive for instead has been called peace by satisfaction, a peace based on ever widening circles of mass prosperity and decency of existence. This is a peace that is necessarily connected to justice and to the belief that it is possible and necessary for us worldwide to achieve much higher levels of peace, human security and justice; that they can indeed move significantly and cumulatively forwards in tandem albeit with stops and starts and even occasional reverses, but that a truly stable world order can only be based on the pursuit of such peace by satisfaction.

2. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

If we are talking about peace with justice then what are the principal injustices of our times that we must overcome? What are the implications or significance of the current global crisis? This crisis is above all the clearest possible indicator of the failure of the model of development that dominated discourse and practice over the last 30 odd years – what we can call the neoliberal form of economic globalization – and which has had a distinctive contemporary impact on what can be referred to as history's four horsemen of the apocalypse. In the neoliberal era these horsemen are either riding at an accelerated gallop and pace or else covering much greater and more diverse ground than ever before. Our task if we really want peace with justice is to slow down, halt and eventually to force the dismounting of these four horsemen.

These are 1) the obscene levels of poverty and inequality of income, wealth and therefore of power that has been created. 2) The escalating ecological damage that in diverse forms is taking place and that raises the question of whether the existence of a capitalism which

is necessarily based on the competitive pursuit of endless profits (both its key strength and its profound weakness) and therefore on the pursuit of endless growth is at all in the longer term compatible with the preservation of planetary ecological balance and stability. 3) The existence of various forms of cultural exclusivisms everywhere – the rise of religious fundamentalisms and revanchisms be they Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish or Buddhist; the emergence of irredentist nationalisms after the break up of the Soviet union and Yugoslavia; the rise, particularly but not only in the advanced capitalist world, of anti-immigrant xenophobia and racism now increasingly taking the form of the demonization of Islam and Muslims. Even as over the last three decades democracy has spread, it has thinned, that is, while the formal characteristics of political democracy such as elections and civilian governments have been extended to more countries, its substantive character and worth has diminished including in the older longstanding democracies. 4) The persistence of militarism and nuclearism.

3. The Double Dynamic

The current economic crisis signals the failure of the neoliberal model but does not signal its demise. Indeed, the dominant discourse, reflecting as it does those interests that have most benefited from this global order, denies any comprehensive failure either conjunctural or longer term. The lesson such defenders draw is that the world financial system must be better regulated, recourse can be made to a mild and limited form of state-directed Keynesianism, and then it is back to business-as-usual retaining the essence of the neoliberal order. If this current crisis has now revealed to many more people the ugly underpinnings of the whole system then it is all the more reason why we need to understand the essential character of this system and its double dynamic if we are to oppose it in the name of justice and the pursuit of peace by satisfaction. What is this double dynamic?

Neoliberalism means the maximum possible extension of the operation of market principles through commodification of spheres that earlier were sought to be guided by quite different social values. The provision of water, basic utilities, health, education, much mass housing and mass transport, pensions and social security, even a part of the media and entertainment sectors were to be placed in the public sphere and whose operations would therefore be made immune to the impact of the existing realities of highly uneven distribution of purchasing power and of initial endowment of assets. The privatization-commodification of what was once considered public domains of de-commodified goods and services has been carried out not just in the name of greater efficiency but even in the name of providing greater freedom and justice -- the market ironically and alarmingly and with the collusion of many intellectuals, made into the very embodiment of this holy trinity of values.

But if the withdrawal of the state from many public responsibilities was key to the promotion of such neoliberalism, it was and is only the state that provides the necessary legal, financial, infrastructural, regulatory, military, and political-legitimising foundations for maintaining the overall order and stability of the system without which the neoliberal model of development cannot sustain, let alone reproduce itself. The state remains the

indispensable enforcer and guardian of the neoliberal model at the national level. Naturally and logically enough, in a parallel move the neoliberal global order has required the system of nation-states to act as the key enforcer and co-ordinating mechanism.

The situation is something like this: the global economic reach of this contemporary form of capitalism is much greater than the reach of any single or even collective political-military power or entity. But political-military stability on a global level is a must and a precondition for effective global coordination, i.e. the securance of a framework where a managed competition between capitals that does not disrupt the overall system can take place. This capitalist competition must to some degree also involve competition between states which after all remain biased towards their own national elites even as a process of globalisation of the interests of elites and middle classes is also taking place. But competition between states is always potentially far more disruptive and dangerous than that between capitals and therefore the system of nation-states itself requires a super-enforcer or super-guardian whose stabilizing capacity lies, in the ultimate analysis, on its own political-military power. In short, the neoliberal world order must have as its inescapable corollary an unbounded militarism. The world banker/financier, the world producer and the world trader necessarily require the world policeman, the world coordinator and the world legitimiser.

We now have an explanation for what otherwise seems to be an incredible paradox. For the first time in centuries the likelihood of debilitating wars between major powers is negligible. Yet militarization continues apace. There is no conceivable military challenge to the US but not only is its rate of growth of military expenditure what it was in the Cold War, there has been a huge geographical expansion of its structure of military related bases/personnel – over 750 such bases in over a 130 countries -- a far greater spread than at the height of the Cold War era. There is an informal US ‘Empire Project’ and the other two components of the hardware of this project are first, US preparations for what it calls “full-spectrum dominance”, i.e., of militarised-nuclearised control of space to be added to that of such control over land, air and sea; and second, its assiduous cultivation of a network of worldwide regional alliances with various states.

As for its software or the mechanisms by which it organizes consent for its imperial project from its own population, the populations of the countries it targets, and populations elsewhere in the world, these are now pivoted around multiple ideological banners that it selectively unfurls from time to time, place to place, from context to context. Forced to abandon its single overarching Cold War banner of “protecting the free world from the Communist threat”, the six new ideological banners are a) humanitarian crisis intervention, b) regime change in the name of democracy, c) WMDs in the wrong hands, d) the global war on terror, e) failed states, f) the war on drugs. These banners get their power and plausibility from the fact that they are not mere concoctions but do refer to real and important problems. But for that very reason their dishonest, hypocritical and deceitful manipulation by the US to serve its own purposes is all the more powerful and effective.

But this enormous power is not meant only to serve specific US interests. The current world order requires the US, despite its relative decline, to continue to behave as the indispensable power to help maintain this very order which collectively benefits all kinds of elites everywhere even if these elite benefits are going to remain unevenly shared. We are faced with a new kind of militarism associated with this new kind of world economic and political order – a militarization without limits, not held for specific targets or specific purposes but for the limitless and general purpose of keeping the current neoliberal order going indefinitely.

A global peace movement committed to the pursuit of justice must make up its mind. Is it to see this US Empire Project like so many on the political right and centre see it – as basically a force for international public good and therefore a force whose global role is to be endorsed even if there can be criticisms here and there in the name of improving its role and performance and correcting its mistakes? Or is it a force for promoting global injustices and therefore its hegemonic project must be resolutely and unflinchingly opposed? There should be no doubts about where I stand in this regard. The US Empire Project cannot be defeated militarily but it can be defeated politically.

4. Our Own Double Movement

Once we accept that this struggle for peace must be linked to the struggle for justice then we are saying that to struggle successfully for a lasting and meaningful peace we must struggle for more than just peace. That to struggle successfully against militarism requires us to struggle against more than militarism. This is because the notion of peace itself has only a negative connotation – the absence of conflict. To inspire millions it must be imbued with a positive content that addresses people's felt grievances and felt problems, hence the importance of the connection of the struggle for peace with the struggle against all kinds of economic, social, cultural and political injustices.

But is there not one obvious exception to this dictum? Surely the struggle for a nuclear free world is one form of the absence of conflict that stands on its own and does not require alignment with any other cause? Surely, if any anti-nuclear peace movement – which in its history has provided among the greatest examples of popular mobilization, bringing millions on to the streets -- is to appeal to the widest cross-section of the world's peoples then it must deliberately avoid alignment to any other specific cause? I am afraid it is not as simple as that and I will say a few words about this a little later. But first something about the peace movement more generally and the unavoidable division of labour this entails since there are so many kinds of injustices that need to be addressed. Witness what I have called the four horsemen of the apocalypse. Each must be the focus of specific campaigns and movements while here too there will be diversity of concerns to be taken up. There is no escape then from the necessarily sectoral character of social movements seeking justice of one kind or the other and to recognize that even when such campaigns and struggles do not carry the banner of peace explicitly, they are very much a part of that larger struggle to bring about a meaningful peace by satisfaction.

But just as our enemies, certainly their leading layers are conscious of the need to preserve their double dynamic – the neoliberal global order with the help of a controlled and expanding militarism; we need to recognize how important it is to construct our own unifying double movement – against the current neoliberal global order and against the accompanying effort to stabilize a hegemonic political-military order led by the US. The World Social Forum (WSF), for all its weaknesses and limitations has been, in fact, a step forwards in trying to create this more unified double movement of our own, to provide a space at least where diverse movements for justice could come together to dialogue, inform, inspire and practically connect with each other. Its two principal thrusts are, in fact, for a much more humane world order, an ‘alter-globalization’ as it were, and against imperialism and war. We will need to learn from and take the WSF experiment forward in a more fruitful direction.

5. The Nuclear Issue Once Again

What finally about the issue that remains at the heart of the concerns of IPPNW and this World Congress – the issue of nuclear weapons and nuclearism? What lessons are to be drawn from the anti-nuclear peace movements and from post-Cold War developments?

While such movements have been among the biggest in human history, the huge mass mobilizations based as they were on fear of a global nuclear holocaust sparked by the East-West divide, they had their own limitations. Fear cannot be an enduring basis for sustaining an anti-nuclear peace movement. It is not surprising that once the Cold War was over and the fear of nuclear confrontation between the US and USSR subsided, the mass movements of the late 1970s and 1980s in North America and Europe faded away. Today, even at the risk of alienating some possible sections of society, such movements have to be linked to the struggle against unjust wars and more specifically against US militarism in West and Central Asia. This is because the US as the biggest nuclear power and the constant pace-setter in nuclear arms development must be pushed to take a lead in nuclear disarmament. Political defeats for the US drives home the message that military prowess is not ultimately decisive when it comes to securing political authority and respect. Nuclear weapons being the most extreme form of military power can thus be exposed as being particularly worthless, politically and strategically speaking. The struggle for nuclear disarmament must be connected to the wider struggle against militarism and unjust wars and occupations. The US government can be pushed to listen to the world’s public but it invariably gives far more importance to its own public, hence the strategic necessity of the world’s anti-nuclear movement to repeatedly find ways of linking up and coordinating its activities with the specifically American branches of the anti-nuclear and anti-war movements.

At the same time we must recognize that the danger of a nuclear outbreak has also shifted and thus require more regionally focused initiatives at both the civil society and governmental levels as well. Even as the danger of a global nuclear holocaust has declined, those of possible regional nuclear confrontations whose geographical zones are outside Europe and North America (primarily in Asia from its West through its South to its East) have risen. There are five major areas of concern. 1) For reasons I will not go

into but which have to do with the fundamentally asymmetrical nature of warfare between state and non-state actors, the danger of non-state nuclear terrorism is negligible. More possible is the use of a 'dirty bomb' or a conventional attack on a nuclear reactor in the US, and which would, if it ever took place, almost certainly lead the US government to carry out a retaliatory attack with nuclear weapons. Given the doctrinal blurring of the firebreak between conventional and nuclear weapons the US could be tempted to pre-emptively use the latter to send home the message that non-state nuclear terrorism is no option for its enemies. There are quite a few voices within the American establishment that have suggested such pre-emptive use, and not just against Iran. 2) There is the real likelihood of the spiraling of a new kind of arms race because of the US's Ballistic Missile Defense or BMD project aimed at Russia and China. Given the opposition of these two quite powerful governments to the BMD project it is possible here for civil society movements and activists to work both with and against governments to derail this project.

3) Then there is the issue of North Korea where it is again the US that is the principal culprit. North Korea is using its small nuclear arsenal as a bargaining chip, being willing to give them up in return for security guarantees from the US and normalization of political-diplomatic relations, after which it can then hope to secure the very significant economic and technological help from South Korea and Japan that it desperately needs. The peace movement should both oppose the nuclearization of the Korean peninsula by North Korean and US governments (its nuclear umbrella over South Korea and its nuclear arms targeted at North Korea) and support the efforts at normalization of relations between them. 4) The attempt to squeeze and isolate Iran while ignoring Israel's possession of nuclear weapons is not on. One would have to be extremely naïve not to realize that the US and its allies are seeking to squeeze Iran for reasons that go well beyond the specific issue of its potential to make nuclear weapons, and have everything to do with much wider and longer term geopolitical considerations regarding control of West and Central Asia. The way to defuse nuclear tensions in this region is obvious – for the peace movement to extend its support to the effort for an early and unconditional establishment of a Middle Eastern Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (MEW MDFZ). All 22 members of the League of Arab States and Iran have long supported this. But it is Israel backed by the US that has been the biggest obstacle with the former engaged in a form of 'international filibustering' by insisting on tying the establishment of such a zone to the prior establishment of a comprehensive peace settlement of the Palestinian issue, a just resolution of which, given the existing relationship of forces, is not possible for a long time to come. This Israeli position is a shabby excuse to justify its indefinite holding of an undeclared nuclear arsenal.

5) Then there is the South Asian nuclear imbroglio. Here is the one part of the world which has two nuclearly armed adversaries involved in a continuous hot-cold war over several decades which shows no sign of ending soon. If the peace movement has every reason to support the effort to establish a South Asian NWFZ even though this is only a remote possibility, there are three other 'transitional' measures that I would like to suggest. I would also urge the IPPNW, given its international prestige and status, to play an important behind-the-scenes role in promoting the last two of these measures. a) We need to publicly advocate the declaration of Kashmir on both sides of the border as an

NWFZ. Since neither India nor Pakistan like being told by the rest of the world that Kashmir is a potential nuclear flashpoint, they can defuse such fears by such a declaration which moreover would not cost them anything, practically speaking, since neither country has deployed nuclear weapons in the parts of Kashmir that they hold. But politically such a declaration would be very significant. It would be something of a political ‘thin end of the wedge’ legitimizing the principle of NWFZs in the region, which is why India and Pakistan would in all probability oppose any such declaration. But advocating such a call would, at the very least, put both governments on the spot in terms of their frequent assertions that they are ‘responsible’ nuclear powers and that whatever tensions exist over Kashmir will not be allowed to escalate to nuclear levels. In which case haven’t they got much to gain in international eyes and little to lose by making such a common or even separate declarations? Interestingly, though this idea was first floated by peace activists in the two countries after 1998, it was taken up in August 2007 by the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference, the ruling regional party on the Pakistan side of the current border.

b) Bangladesh has been the one country in South Asia which has publicly and officially called for the establishment of a South Asian NWFZ. Yet another way of it politically embarrassing India and Pakistan and highlighting that the two have endangered nuclear security in South Asia is for the Bangkok Treaty or Southeast Asian NWFZ to be stretched to include Bangladesh. To this effect there is no reason why IPPNW should not engage in discussions with relevant official bodies and personnel in Southeast Asia and in Bangladesh to explore possible movement in this direction. c) Finally, there is the case of Nepal. The dominant party, the Unified Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist (UCPN-M) is far from hostile to the idea of declaring Nepal a single state NWFZ like Mongolia. But Nepal could become the only country in the world to *Constitutionally* declare itself such a single state NWFZ and in doing so establish a world first that would make the kind of international impact and garner international appreciation in a way that small underdeveloped countries like itself would otherwise never be able to achieve. This would greatly embarrass India in particular and send a message of Nepal’s determination to pursue an independent foreign policy regardless of Indian pressures. Again, there is no reason why the IPPNW should not seek discussions with all the parties in Nepal about this possibility since Nepal is currently in the process of drawing up a Constitution which will have been based on a Constituent Assembly itself set up on the basis of full adult franchise – another world rarity.

To move towards a nuclear weapons free world the global peace movement will need to think and act more creatively and determinedly than ever before. In contrast to those who think political success has little or nothing to do with morality, the whole course of the 20th century shows that its truly great successes – the defeat of apartheid, the end of colonialism, the extraordinarily rapid and bloodless collapse of an authoritarian USSR into more pieces than even existed during the rule of the Tsarist multinational empire, the political defeat of the world’s most powerful military power, the US, because the Vietnamese were prepared never to give up, no matter what the sacrifices required, in the pursuit of their truly righteous cause of national liberation and unification – were all morally founded. Similarly the road to nuclearism is built by the politics of hate and fear

but it is always paved with the stones of moral indifference. It is that moral indifference that we must struggle to overcome, and ultimate victory will be ours.

Achin Vanaik