

In the Name of the Dead Children

Day, after day, after day... until it becomes routine and no longer makes the news: children killed as “collateral damages” in acts of war by Israel’s “selective killings”, by the terrorist reactions of Palestine militias or by Hezbollah missiles. Children killed in Iraq by “insurgents”, by their own armed forces or by invaders... How can we at last stop the madness of war and commence the 21st century by replacing force with dialogue? The emotions that I felt at the sight of a little girl riddled with shrapnel made me think that by merely invoking the dead children we may finally be able to convince all of those on all sides, of all creeds and ideologies, to put down their arms and to gather around a table to attempt to find peaceful solutions to their conflicts.

In the name of the dead children... realizing that they could be ours. Perhaps only then will the thirst for revenge and the hostilities, bitterness and hate give way to a place and to the will to seek conciliation. Only then will the dark hands that guide the immense war machine comprehend that their time is up, that we have already paid –in victims and in money– the terrible price of war.

In the name of the dead children: “Save the Children” recently published that at present 50 million children are affected by armed conflicts. And UNICEF reports that thousands die daily from hunger, lack of attention and neglect. Will these figures, this information, the horrendous vision of children dying of hunger or ripped apart by shrapnel finally suffice to mobilize the public, opening their eyes and shocking them into action?

Accustomed to accepting with resignation “whatever happens”, fearful and waiting “to see what they will do” (the heads of government, national and international institutions...), we only seem to awaken from our habitual state of apathy when something really exceptional occurs. Only then is our reaction worthy of human dignity and our common destiny. And thousands of thousands generously offer to help, and others –with their hands covered in tar from the Prestige oil spill, or administering first aid to the victims of Hurricane Mitch or the tsunami in the Indian Ocean– show us the extent of human solidarity and our capacity for selflessness and compassion. And once again it restores our faith.

The moment to refuse to just sit back and watch has come. The moment to cease to be mere spectators until another distressing incident shocks us into action. We have to mobilize ourselves, not virtually but with our physical presence, to express a resounding NO to war and violence. And to demand the rapid deployment of “blue helmets” and with all parties, without exception, respecting the ceasefire, to commence building peace under the guidance of the United Nations.

To transcend this culture of imposition and force and to embrace a culture of dialogue and understanding is more unfamiliar to us than it is difficult. Because, and I always insist, that for centuries we have allowed ourselves to be guided by a recommendation that is destructive, although highly appreciated (in all senses of the term) by the weapons industry: “if you want peace, prepare for war”. And, logically, we do what we are prepared to do... often giving our lives for causes that are totally divorced from our own. We are not accustomed to peace, to building peace, to making peace. Perhaps if we remember the dead children we will be capable of

overcoming the inertia of so many years of war and hostility, and to join in the daily task of building harmony and peace.

Upon initiating a peace process, which is often interrupted and is always a rocky road, I have often thought of the hundreds or thousands of victims who could have been saved if the parties –remembering their own children– had only decided to sit down and engage in dialogue much sooner. The sooner, the better, aided by a Conciliation Commission which, under the guidance of the Secretary General of the United Nations, must permanently be available. It is a bittersweet feeling, because this regret has always been accompanied by great expectations that the commencement of peace talks will yield positive results.

Israelis and Palestinians decided to live together in peace. I remember visiting Yasser Arafat in November, 1987 in the PLO headquarters in Tunisia. “We must learn to live together”, he often repeated. Several months later Shimon Peres said emphatically in Tel-Aviv: “there is no other option than to live together in peace”. I later met several times with Yitzhak Rabin. It was he who most decidedly promoted the Oslo Accords, including the Jerusalem as the co-capital of both states. The process advanced... until one fateful day an assassin’s hand took his life. As it did John and Robert Kennedy. And Anwar El-Sadat. Rabin died talking of peace, and not making war. In the UNESCO headquarters in Paris we erected the Yitzhak Rabin Square of Tolerance, with an olive tree monument by the famous Israeli sculptor Dani Karavan. Let us hope that in the not too distant future the dove of the peace that Rabin supported and for which he worked so hard will perch on a branch of that olive tree.

The immense majority of Palestinians and Israelis desire to live in peace. There is only one condition: all human beings have the same worth. This radical equality in dignity is the only requisite for co-existence. During one of my visits to Haddasa Hospital in Jerusalem, someone asked the director of the Department of Neurology, “that woman who you are treating over there is Palestinian, isn’t she?” The director responded, “I don’t know. Everyone here is a patient”.

Yes, all are equal. Each life, each death has the same value. And to guarantee that this is the case, a United Nations strengthened and endowed with the necessary human, financial and technical resources. This is the best guarantee for the future. It is now clear that a group of countries –G7 or G8– cannot be in charge of governing the world. And much less a dominant power. Nevertheless, all of them are necessary to ensure the efficiency of multilateralism.

Now, right now, in the name of the dead children, those who are dying or being killed, this madness must stop immediately, on both sides, on all sides.

Stopping all acts of violence to halt his infernal spiral of action and reaction. “The people”, to whom the first sentence in the Preamble of the UN Charter alludes, can no longer remain silent and complacent, because this affects the common destiny of their descendants. In truth, all the children of the world are our children. There is no distinction nor prevalence of one over the other. Each child has the same worth. Immense worth. And as in the hospital in Jerusalem, children have no nationality or skin color.

When all calls for restraint and conciliation have failed, let us have the courage to think of the dead children and of our own children, so that no more will have to die. We must all mobilize, using every resource at our disposal. Let there be no more silent spectators. If we do not take action, if the associations, NGOs, institutions of civil society... do not get decidedly involved and, in a popular outcry, manage to stop the madness of the logic of war –no matter how much it hurts the fanatics, extremists and those who continue to benefit from the law of the strongest– we will have failed the children who, without our knowing, perhaps were trusting in us when their lives were taken.

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