

Keynote Address by former Prime Minister of Malaysia

Are We Really Civilized? Make War a Crime

Mahathir bin Mohamad

FIRSTLY, I would like to thank the organizers of this symposium for this opportunity to share some of my views on peace, harmony and war. It is an honor to be invited here, thank you very much. I'd like to congratulate the Centre for Civilizational Dialogue, University of Malaya, and the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, Japan for organizing this important symposium. When I read the theme of this symposium, I immediately replied that I would attend. I am very interested in peace and the absence of war, because I have been very much involved in trying to make war a crime.

Killing a Million People makes You a Hero?

It is a very strange thing in our present civilization that if you kill one person, you will be arrested and if found guilty, hanged to death; but killing a million people is not considered as a crime. There is something odd about this kind of thinking. If you kill one person, you will get the death penalty, but if you kill a million people, you will be called a hero, receive medals, and you are remembered forever. This is illogical. When we look back at the history of mankind, human beings have always been fighting each other. They fight each other for dominance or because they want to possess what the other person has or the other groups have. That was in the past, before we became civilized.

If you look at the monkey's world, you can see that they always have what is known as a dominant male. In any group of them, there is one male who is dominant, and no other males can enter the group unless they show obedience to the dominant one. But over time he grows old, like all of us. When the dominant male is old and weak, the young male attacks the old dominant male, kills him or pushes him out, and the young male then becomes the new dominant male. I think this kind of behavior can also be seen in human beings because human beings also seem to have the desire to dominate others. First, some may start

dominating within a small group, and if there are several groups or communities, there would be one group which would attempt to dominate all the other groups. In order to dominate, they fight, and it often involves killing. Then they will justify and glorify this killing. Over time they have became more civilized and they should have stopped fighting, because killing is a crime, but they did not stop fighting.

A More Civilized Age is a More Killing Age

If you watch or reread history, you will find that as they become more civilized, more intelligent and more knowledgeable, they began to develop better weapons for killing.

In the past, when they were using bows, arrows, and spears, they could not kill so many people. But over time, they begin to develop more efficient killing weapons. When the Chinese knowledge of explosives went to the West, European countries were fighting each other. The moment they got hold of these explosives, the first thing they thought was how they could use the explosives to kill more people from a greater distance. Therefore, people in Europe developed guns which became more and more powerful. They were able to hit the target with the projectiles from far away. They also fill the shells with explosives so that not only it will hit and kill the targets, but it will explode and kill more people. Today, man has discovered how to kill a hundred thousand people with just one bomb.

That is what happened to Japan. The atomic bomb could make such an explosion and wipe out a whole town. They tested this atomic bomb during the war, and dropped it on Hiroshima and Nagasaki which killed hundreds of thousands of people. Despite these mass killings, the search for more efficient weapon for killing has continued. Today, a nuclear weapon has the power to kill an enormous number of people. And the number of nuclear warheads possessed by countries like Russia and the U.S. is huge. Each country has about 10,000 of them. If they were to have a nuclear war, the whole world will be wiped out. I think we have reached the ultimate. Our civilization can be wiped out completely. That is what happens although people claim to be civilized.

When we look back, we can see that civilized people initially did not punish murder.—Later on, they learn to be more considerate and regarded murder as a crime, a serious crime. And they made a law which punishes a criminal with death. Since man became more civilized and defined killing as a crime, they should not go to war, but they didn't stop

going to war. So if we think back, can we claim we are really civilized? I have my doubts, because we are now in the business of developing weapons that can kill more and more people.

Injustice of “the Victors in a War trying the Losers”

When we look back at history, there were fierce fightings between tribes. We know that before the coming of Islam, the Arabic people were divided into tribes, and these tribes had conflicts against each other. They had been fighting simply because they belonged to different tribes. And this went on for generations, and it did not stop. If you ask them “Why do you fight and kill?” the answer would be “They are enemies.” They had forgotten why, but they continued to kill. Today, we are no better. We see conflicts still going on between countries of the world. Even though some countries are not enemies yet, they still prepare to fight against those countries that could be their potential enemies.

In the last two world wars, according to one estimate, 70 million people were killed. 70 million people were killed in the wars for the noble purpose of “ending all wars.” But we still see wars and preparations to wars in the world. We have never really given up this very primitive way of solving problems between nations. I think that we are not yet civilized, because while we think it is a crime to kill one person, but we still think it is not a crime to have war, to kill thousands and millions of people.

I believe that some people regard war as a crime, but they think crime is only committed by defeated people, and the winners are not criminals. Defeated people were tried, and many were sentenced to death for war crimes. But the people who tried them were also guilty of killing. In fact, they killed more people, but because they won the war, their killing was not regarded as a crime. This is grossly unfair. As you know in a court of law, the judge should be impartial. The judge should not take sides; but we see that in wars, it is the victors who set up the courts to try the losers. Obviously, we have still not become civilized enough to understand that crimes should be tried by people who are not involved, who are neutral.

If we cannot solve problems by killing each other through war, then how do we solve problems of conflicts?

Peaceful Settlements by Malaysia

Malaysia has borders with five countries, and they all had claims over

our territories. One of which was the dispute over an area of the sea with Thailand. On the North East Coast of Malaysia, there is an area of the sea which was claimed by Malaysia and also by Thailand. These two nations disputed over this small part of the sea where it was believed there were some natural resources. Fortunately, the previous Prime Minister before me decided to make a peaceful solution, and he started negotiation with the Thai government. In the end, the Prime Ministers of Thailand and Malaysia decided to share the natural resources extracted from this area equally. Thus, we set up a joint development area. Today, gas produced in the area is shared equally between Malaysia and Thailand. We are enjoying the profits from this area without one person being killed. Had we gone to war, we might not be able to exploit the natural resources. We may lose or win, but winning or losing does not end the problem. If Malaysia wins and Thailand later becomes very strong, they will soon try to get back that area. If Malaysia loses, we also will try to get back this area. However, since we have agreed on making a peaceful solution to this claim, today we are producing gas from that area, and we are sharing good incomes.

Malaysia also had a problem with Indonesia. There are two islands near Sabah which was claimed by Indonesia and by Malaysia. We negotiated for a settlement, but the discussion went on for years without a prospect of a settlement. We finally decided to go to the World Court (International Court of Justice: ICJ). In the end the court decided that these two islands belong to Malaysia. Indonesia had committed to accept the decision made by the World Court. That settled our problem with Indonesia. We didn't have to go to war.

Malaysia also had a problem with our neighbor in the south, Singapore. There is a small rock in the sea. Since there was concern that ships would crash into the rock, a lighthouse was put up by the British during their rule. The British put up lighthouses in several places in Malaysia and Singapore. This was a time when the Malay Peninsula and Singapore were regarded as one country, and they were both under British administration. Therefore, for convenience, the British administered the lighthouses from Singapore. After both countries became independent, Malaysia claimed that Singapore could own the lighthouse but the rock belonged to Malaysia. We negotiated over and over again, and we couldn't settle these claims, so finally we decided to go to the World Court. The World Court judged that this rock belongs to Singapore. It was unfortunate for Malaysia, but we fought no war. Suppose we had decided to go to war, a few hundred people or a few thousand people might have been killed.

Malaysia had a problem with Brunei also, they claimed some parts of the sea as theirs, Malaysia claimed they are ours, but in the end we negotiated and it was agreed that they belong to Brunei. However, Brunei allowed Petronas to be the operator for extracting the petroleum in them.

Malaysia had another problem with the Philippines. The Philippines claimed that the whole of Sabah is part of the Philippines. It used to belong to the Sultanate of Sulu which sold it off, and eventually it became a part of Malaysia. However, the Philippines claimed that it belonged to the Philippines, so there was some tension between these two nations. Eventually, we set up our embassies as if relations are normal. However, the Philippines didn't drop their claims, and we too did not give up Sabah. Nevertheless, we did not go to war with them either.

This, I think, is the way to solve the problem of claims or conflicts between nations. It is my earnest wish that Japan and China will also peacefully solve the problem of their dispute over some islands between them.

What we Gain in War is much Less than what we Lose

There is a way to solve complex problems between nations. We must accept that sometimes you lose and sometimes gain. If possible, the solution should be a win-win solution in which both sides gain something. The best thing is that we don't have to sacrifice young people in wars, because in the end, we both get nothing. Probably, the amount of money you have to spend in war would exceed the amount of gas, oil or whatever resources that can be extracted from the disputed area. The United States spent much more money in the Vietnam War than the World War II. Even if there are natural resources around there, the amount of money that will be spent, the number of people who will be killed, and the damage that will be done to one's country are many times worse than the benefits gained from the disputed area. Despite this, some people still think of war as an option. This is why I think we are not quite civilized.

War is about killing people, killing massive numbers of people. At the present day, we see wars from a distance. But I myself went through a war. When the Second World War in the Pacific broke out, I saw brutality that was immeasurable. I wondered how awful I would feel if I got killed in the war. I think killing people for your own gain is very primitive and selfish. If we claim to be civilized, and want to live a

harmonious life in peace that can be sustainable, then we should abolish war. We should regard war as a crime.

Current technology has produced UAV which costs lower. UAV stands for Unmanned Aerial Vehicle. Operators can see a target in a room three thousand miles from the battle ground and operate this unmanned vehicle to assassinate people, and blow up the whole town out of existence. “As long as I survive and my country wins, we can say that we had a good war, and I don't care if others die.” I'm afraid if people think in this way, I believe we are not truly civilized.

Towards the World without War

I hope that the work to abolish war will go on. I consented to come to this symposium because this symposium is about peace, harmonious coexistence, and sustainability. I believe that one day there will be peace and harmonious coexistence between people of different races from different countries. When that happens, we will live in a much more peaceful world without war, and we can enjoy life to the full extent.

This is the reason I believe, the Centre for Civilizational Dialogue at University of Malaya was set-up. I believe that by working together with the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, which is also devoted to peace, we will be moving one step forward towards the day when wars would be forbidden and people live a better life. It is going to be a long struggle, and it might take decades, or even centuries, but please always remember that at one time slavery was accepted everywhere, all over the world. People had slaves, but somebody thought this was not humane, and those who believed this fought against slavery. After many decades and centuries of struggling, slavery was abolished. As you can see, slavery took a long time to be abolished. Likewise, even if it would not be realized in my lifetime or even in your lifetime, I believe that one day war will be abolished. Then, we can finally claim that we are at last civilized.