GA Thematic Debate on Human Security

April 14, 2011

GAPW fully embraces a movement towards a more dependable and inclusive framework of human security. Our three programmatic pillars—disarmament, women, peace and security, and civilian protection— as well as our complementary work on torture, the 'responsibility to protect' and other concerns, are synergistically connected and reinforcing as part of the larger aim of enhancing the opportunities and dignity for each individual by reducing conflict and removing ideological and political impediments. The cross-cutting nature of human security allows us to draw connections and underscore linkages between areas of security that might otherwise appear unrelated as well as remain flexible in determining the most compelling and valuable modes of accomplishing our goals.

At the request of its President, Ambassador Joseph Deiss of Switzerland, the General Assembly gathered for a thematic debate on the issue of human security as part of the work of its 65th session. In the context of an evolving security framework, one that has paradigmatically shifted from focus primarily on territorial security to one that is more encompassing and underscores the linkages between security, development, and human rights to enhance the individual dignity of all persons, Ambassador Deiss invited all member states to participate in an interactive dialogue composed of two panels. In response to an increase in the severity of transnational concerns—climate change, pandemics, natural disasters, nuclear weapon proliferation, and terrorism among others—the General Assembly agreed at the 2005 World Summit to further discuss and define the concept of human security. The World Summit Outcome (A/RES/60/1) recognizes that "all individuals, in particular vulnerable people, are entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential." In March 2010, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon released his own report on human security. There has been markedly increased appreciation of an international approach to security that is more comprehensive, people-centered, and multi-dimensional to adequately address the complex concerns of our time.

The first panel, "A possible approach for defining human security," featured four experts— former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, Dr. Frene Ginwala of the Commission on Human Security, Dr. Jennifer Leaning of Harvard Medical School, and Dr. Amitav Acharya of the organization TRANSCEND. The afternoon panel, "Human security—Its application and added value," included four esteemed scholars—Dr. Han Gunter Brauch of the UN University's Institute for Environment and Human Security; Dr. Sonia Picado, President of the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights; Dr. Andrew Mack, former Director of the Strategic Planning Office for Secretary-General Kofi Annan; and Mr. Cheick Sidi Diarra, Special Adviser on Africa and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States.

The panelists brought diverse perspectives to this wide-reaching concept. President Obasanjo reiterated the call of the 2005 World Summit to provide all people with "freedom from fear, freedom from want, and the freedom to live in dignity" as core elements of human security. He also called for development of a Human Security Index to evaluate country performance. This concept was welcomed by many delegations keen to have a concrete list of indicators as a point of reference for an otherwise elusive concept. In a divergence of opinion, Dr. Ginwala focused on the dynamic nature of human security. She warned against proposing an itemized list of human security factors, which would not allow for flexibility

as it relates to each society individually. Dr. Acharya, however, supported a prioritization of human security factors to help manage the convergence of views on the concept. Dr. Leaning of Harvard emphasized the erosion of human security as a result of the outbreak of war, insecurity that is often multi-generational and foundationally destructive to the society. It is imperative, according to Dr. Leaning, to restore a sense of security to conflict affected societies through practical measures such as reopening of banks and the restoration of traffic lights and roads.

The afternoon panel brought to light the implications of human insecurity. Dr. Brauch addressed environmental impacts and called for the placement of sustainable development within the broader concept of human security. Dr. Picado advocated for concrete, public projects (with examples from Latin America) that are designed to strengthen institutions as a vehicle through which to combat human insecurity. Dr. Mack warned against discussing human security exclusively within political and academic silos and pointed out the difficulties of human security in theory despite its utility in practice.

The discussions and reactions from member states centered primarily on a definition of human security, or rather, a lack of a cohesive and universally-accepted definition of human security in the international community. Subsequently, discussions progressed to the question of whether an explicitly defined concept is absolutely necessary or if a more general expression of confidence in the idea is sufficient for moving the human security agenda forward. Ambassador Leger of Switzerland, representing the Human Security Network composed of Austria, Chile, Costa Rica, Greece, Ireland, Jordan, Mali, Norway, Slovenia, Switzerland, Thailand, and South Africa (as an observer), expressed support for a concept of human security that is vertically integrated to bridge actions at the individual, local, national, and global levels. The Ambassador reminded the audience that states have worked on various aspects of human security thus far without a straight-forward definition, implying that, perhaps, one definition is not indispensable to the process. Contrastingly, Pakistan stated clearly that it has an interest in a universally-accepted definition that promotes cooperation and discourages politically-motivated human security interventions. The representatives of Ecuador and Bolivia also expressed explicit support for a clear definition noting that an ambiguous concept presents interventionist dangers. Venezuela encouraged the Secretary-General to seek the views of member states on a notion of human security in order to prepare a new report for the 66th session of the GA.

Also important to several delegations was the distinction between human security and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm. Both Egypt and Zambia were quick to point out that these are different concepts and should not be conflated into a single theoretical framework. This opinion was also reiterated by the European Union, whose delegate stated that human security is inherently different from R2P. The delegate of India agreed that the international community should reinvigorate efforts to reach a decision on what human security is all about and be aware of what it should and should not entail. The Russian Federation called for long-term negotiations towards a more formal definition of human security.

The path forward will require some degree of consolidation so that the diverse perspectives on this issue can be adequately assimilated. Perhaps the best way forward is addressing the causes of human insecurity bearing in mind the intrinsic multi-dimensional nature of the concept. The fear of many delegations appeared to be seeing human security as a panacea for all development, security, and human rights concerns. Nonetheless, it is unavoidable that a more encompassing definition of security be pursued

to address the litany of inter-connected human security concerns that plague the international community across permeable national borders.