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Press Conference entitled “Preparing the future, building peace in the time of Covid-19”

At 11.30 this morning, in the “John Paul II” Hall of the Holy See Press Office, a press conference was held entitled “Preparing the future, building peace in the time of Covid-19”.

The speakers were: His Eminence Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and president of the Vatican Commission for Covid-19; Sr Alessandra Smerilli, coordinator of the Economy Task-Force of the Vatican Commission for Covid-19 and professor of political economy at the Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences “Auxilium”; and Dr Alessio Pecorario, coordinator of the Security Task-Force of the Vatican Commission for Covid-19 and official of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

The following are their interventions:

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Intervention by His Eminence Cardinal Peter K.A. Turkson

As we all know, we are facing one of the worst humanitarian crises since World War II. As the world takes emergency measures to address a global pandemic and a global economic recession, both underpinned by a global climate emergency, we must also consider the implications for peace of these interconnected crises. The Vatican Covid-19 Commission, especially through the Task Forces on Security and Economics, has been analysing some of these implications. Let me highlight the followings.

While today unprecedented sums are devoted to military expenditure (including the largest nuclear modernisation programs), the sick, the poor, the marginalised, and victims of conflict are being disproportionately affected by the present crisis. Until now, the interconnected crises (health, socio-economics and ecology) are widening the gap not only between the rich and the poor, but also between zones of peace, prosperity and environmental justice and zones of conflict, deprivation and ecological devastation.

There can be no healing without peace. Reducing conflicts is the only chance for reducing injustices and

inequalities. Armed violence and conflict and poverty are indeed linked in a cycle that prevents peace, furthers human rights abuses and hampers development.

I welcome the UN Security Council's recent endorsement of a global cease-fire.[i] We can't fight the pandemic if we are fighting, or preparing to fight, each other. I also welcome the endorsement by 170 countries to the UN call to silence the guns![ii] But one thing is to call or endorse a cease-fire statement, another thing is to implement it. In order to do so, we need to freeze weapons production and dealing.

The current interconnected crises I mentioned (health, socio-economics and ecological) demonstrate the urgent need for a globalisation of solidarity to reflect our global interdependence. In the last two decades, international stability and security have deteriorated.[iii] It seems that political friendship and international concord increasingly cease to be the supreme good that nations desire and are ready to commit to.

Regrettably, instead of being united for the common good against a common threat that knows no borders, many leaders are deepening international and internal divisions. In this sense, the pandemic, through health fatalities and complications, economic recession and conflicts represents the perfect storm! We need global leadership that can re-build bonds of unity while rejecting scapegoating, mutual recrimination, chauvinistic nationalism, isolationism, and other forms of selfishness. As Pope Francis said last November in Nagasaki, we must "break down the climate of distrust" and prevent the "erosion of multilateralism"[iv]. In the interest of building a sustainable peace, we must foster a 'culture of encounter' where men and women discover one another as members of one human family, share the same belief. Solidarity. Trust. Encounter. Common good. Nonviolence. We believe these are the foundations of actual human security.

The Church strongly supports projects of peacebuilding that are essential for conflict and post-conflict communities to respond to COVID-19. Without controlling arms, it is impossible to ensure security. Without security, the responses to the pandemic are not complete.

The COVID-19 pandemic, the economic recession, and the climate change make ever clearer the need to give priority to positive peace over narrow notions of national security. Pope John XXIII already signalled the need for this transformation by re-defining peace in terms of the recognition, respect, safeguarding, and promotion of the rights of the human person (*Pacem in terris*, 139). Now, more than ever, is the time for nations of the world to shift from national security by military means to human security as the primary concern of policy and international relations. Now is the time for the international community and the Church to develop bold and imaginative plans for collective action commensurate with the magnitude of this crisis. Now is the time to build a world that better reflects a truly integral approach to peace, human development, and ecology.

Thank you!

[i] <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1067552>

[ii] <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/1066982>

[iii] <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2019/09/27/190927b.html>

[iv] http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/november/documents/papa-francesco_20191124_messaggio-arminucleari-nagasaki.html

Intervention by Sr Alessandra Smerilli

The pandemic, which is a common enemy, has brought out at an experiential level the importance of the

common good. As Pope Francis reminds us, no one can do it alone. We can face a common and global enemy only if we understand that we are all linked to each other: a humanity with a common destiny. We can only succeed with everyone's commitment.

The pandemic has revealed our weaknesses, starting with the healthcare systems: the scale and gravity of the pandemic has overwhelmed even well-resourced healthcare systems. In addition to exerting high pressure on health systems, the pandemic has also provoked a dramatic increase in demand for essential medical supplies[1]. Health systems need greater quality investments worldwide. We need protection against communicable diseases, and we need to invest in prevention: COVID-19 has revealed the insufficient funding of treatment for communicable diseases at the heart of many healthcare systems. Right now we need a vaccine.

The pandemic has revealed the true extent of our interconnectedness. We know that health is a global commons, and prevention and care services must be global as well. In particular, global health must be considered a common good in the sense that everyone has an equal right to it, but also an equal responsibility to promote it.

The economic recession that involves the whole world and continues to expand will cause the displacement of billions of jobs[2]. The economic and social crisis could have disastrous dimensions

There are ways out, but they require vision, courage and international collaboration. No state, just like its people, can do it alone as huge public investment in healthcare, ecological transition, retraining of workers and aid to companies (that will initially suffer damage from the transition) are required.

Pope Francis has asked us for creative solutions. So, we have been asking ourselves: if instead of doing the arms race, we 'race' towards food, health and work security? What are citizens asking for right now? Do they need a strong military state, or a state that invests in common goods? How would every citizen want their money to be spent today? Does it make sense to continue to make massive investments in weapons if human lives cannot be saved because there is no adequate healthcare system? If I have a sick person in the family, for example, who needs medical treatment, won't I direct all my resources to treating my family member? Military spending in the world in 2019 reached its peak[3].

I do not want to sound trivial, but we are at a stage in which we must understand where to direct financial resources during this paradigm shift. Today, the first safety is that of health and well-being. What are arsenals for, if a handful of infected people are enough to spread the epidemic and cause many victims? The pandemic knows no borders.

We know that the issue is more complicated than it seems: the arms race is a dilemma that sees states, out of fear of other states, or wanting to excel, to continue to increase their military power. This generates a vicious circle that never ends, pushing in turn towards a constant increase in military spending, a positional competition that causes irrational expenses. This type of race stops only with a collective will of self-limitation. We need courageous leaders who can demonstrate that they believe in the common good, who are committed to guaranteeing what is most needed today. We need a collective pact to direct resources for health security and wellbeing.

[1] See <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/financing-common-goods-for-health>

[2] See https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_749399.pdf

[3] See https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/yb20_summary_en_v2_0.pdf, p. 10.

Intervention by Dr Alessio Pecorario

The worst medical impact of COVID-19 is still to come warns the *World Health Organisation* (WHO). The impact so far is already triggering the most severe economic and social disruption of modern times. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has already predicted a global fall in *Gross Domestic Product* (GDP) by at least 3%. In turn this directly impacts security at all levels from domestic to the global.

The support for a global ceasefire by the UN Security Council and the support it received from the vast majority of States[i] is an important stabilising measure, which according to us could be completed with a freeze or moratoria on weapons production and dealing – as the Pope has observed now is not the time to be manufacturing weapons.[ii]

Nevertheless, the *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (SIPRI) observes continued increases in military spending. Global military spending in 2019 was 1.9 trillion US dollars[iii] (which far surpasses annual military global expenditures during the Cold War and is some 300 times the budget of the WHO), and some observers and officials urge increased military spending in response to COVID-19. Military spending ranges from new nuclear weapons programmes amongst all those that already possess them, through major conventional armed forces equipment and small arms with exports into conflict regions.

Cyber warfare and crime has made COVID-19 a new theatre of operations.[iv] Criminal organisations also are engaged in activity uncondusive to peace and prosperity in an area of acute vulnerability of integrated information technology systems. Tensions are rising with COVID-19 at times has become a reason for dispute, fuelling what the Vatican Security Task Force has described as “conflict trap”, “security dilemma”, etc.

Choices have to be made. Medical supplies, food security and economic revival focused on social justice and green economy all require resources that can be diverted from the military sector in the context of renewed arms control. The arms control achievements and treaty structures enabled a peace dividend in the last generation, can there be a renaissance in this area?

Food Security is first and fundamental in international security. The UN *Food and Agriculture Organisation* (FAO) here in Rome was created in the 1940s to prevent hunger fuelling a new world conflict, today it highlights increases resulting from COVID-19 in starvation and disruption of world food supplies.[v] The World Food Programme (WFP) already estimates a doubling of those facing starvation.[vi] Integral Human Development requires urgent redeployment of global resources to free people from want.

Looking beyond the immediate needs of hunger we need a depth of analysis that perhaps the ancient perspective of this city can assist. A bleak innovation of the present crisis is that it combines the COVID-19 pandemic with the nationalist adventurism and economic inequality last seen prior to 1914 and 1939, with the emerging economic slump last seen in the 1930s in combination with nuclear weapons and the rapid onset of climate change.

Through the Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio* of March 26, 1967, affirming the concept of integral human development, the Magisterium of the Church anticipates what would become an important paradigm-shift after World War II, namely the move from the focus on national security to human and global security, from the mere prevention of conflicts towards wider peace-building. Along with our Security Task Force’s Members we remind that the post-WW2 international institutions were set up to bring and support development and peace. In the light of the emergency, complexity and interconnected challenges arisen from the pandemic, we could conclude that human and financial resources and technology should be used to create and stimulate strategies, alliances and systems to protect lives and the planet and not to kill people and ecosystems. According to us Multilateralism and the implementations of Sustainable Development Goals are key in this process.

Thank you!

[i] <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1067552>; <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/1066982>

[ii] http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20200412_urbi-et-orbi-pasqua.html

[iii] https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/yb20_summary_en_v2.pdf

[iv] <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/23-04-2020-who-reports-fivefold-increase-in-cyber-attacks-urges-vigilance> <https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/report/covid-19-cyberwar>

[v] <http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/analysis/en/>

[vi] <https://www.wfp.org/news/covid-19-will-double-number-people-facing-food-crises-unless-swift-action-taken>
