

BRUNCH

"Can you feel the terror? A discussion of the role of the UN in promoting human security" February 2004

The following is a summary of the Wisdom at Work discussions:

The first speaker, a Terrorism Expert, noted that, sadly, the bombing of the UN in Baghdad last August may have added to the credibility of the UN on the issue of terrorism in so far as it was now also viewed as a victim. With respect to how the matter was being framed and correspondingly addressed by the UN system, a large spectrum of perspectives was represented - from terrorists seen as human rights violators, to ensuring protection of human rights while tackling terrorism, to the need to reaffirm the international community's commitment to human rights (this last being promoted by the UN Secretary-General). At this stage however the overall view was more narrow and short-term, and had not fully recognized the role of deeper issues which may lay at the root of many of the terrorist actions taken. It may be possible however to expand current understanding with greater advocacy by concerned entities, including within the UN.

The second speaker, a trainer on conflict prevention and peace-building, sought to frame the issue from the perspective of human relations. He said that people tend to over-identify with the individual self and this led to a fear of the "other" and a fear for individual survival, which is exploited by those who seek to control by fear, including fascists. Political violence and social terrorism, including xenophobia, thrived on the perpetuation of this fear. Another effect was institutional paralysis with multilateralism being consumed by the short-term anti-terrorist" agenda, to the detriment of other equally valid global concerns that contribute to vulnerability to the culture of terror, such as poverty and social marginalization. While change at the UN level was ultimately a question of political will, at the individual level we needed to expand the definition of self to include fundamental connection with others, and thereby increase our 'spiritual intelligence quotient'; we can influence others only by changing our sense of ourselves and by doing this we will be able to transcend fear and keep spiritual vigil in the age of terrorism.

Follow-up exchanges:

- The possibility was raised that terrorism may be viewed as an act towards the fulfillment of human security and human rights, that in fact a terrorist could have a high "spiritual intelligence quotient", although his means were violent; this element of justifiability was perhaps an obstacle to political consensus on the issue
- It was noted that insecurity was a relative term and perhaps what was classified as terrorism were attempts to adjust to changes such as globalization which increased a sense of social insecurity for many
- Attention was drawn to the need to engage governments in dialogue on the broader understanding of human security and approaches to terrorism. Partners in this regard could also be civil society, business and even parliaments, who would also need to be more strongly engaged on the issue. The role of high level UN officials in such advocacy also needed to be heightened.