

**My Recollections**  
**Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, 5th Secretary-General of the United Nations**  
**By SGI President Ikeda**

Time was running out. It was Dec. 31, 1991, and the year would soon be over. United Nations Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar was at the U.N. Headquarters trying to bring negotiations for a cease-fire in El Salvador to a successful close. His term of office would expire at midnight. And when he was no longer secretary-general, it was likely that the long series of agreements and concessions achieved so far would fall apart.

Only hours remained.

The conflict in El Salvador between the military and the leftist guerrillas of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional had continued for 12 years, claiming an estimated 75,000 lives.

El Salvador is a small nation. In the conflict, many farmers had been driven from their lands, which lay waste. Numberless children had been permanently maimed and had gone without schooling all their short lives. Some 60 percent of El Salvadoran women had lost fathers, husbands or sons.

The secretary-general talked again and again with both sides in the conflict. Coming up against the wall of mutual suspicion that divided them, he confronted that doubt and hatred head-on, trying to bring the two sides closer together with compromise proposals. Everyone trusted him for his fairness and integrity.

In 1988, the trust Iran placed in Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar was also the key to negotiations that ended the Iran–Iraq War. An Iranian diplomat said: “He became important to us. Thousands of lives were saved. Also, we had to maintain a link to the United Nations, and since we had boycotted the council he was our only link. He proved to be a man of honor [with] a high degree of personal integrity.”<sup>1</sup>

I met the secretary-general on four occasions. On each I was impressed by his humility and sincere devotion to peace. He had the appearance of a philosopher. In everything he said, I sensed the deep thought he gave to the question of how he as an individual should live in this world.

Both the El Salvadoran military and the leftist guerrillas were aware of the futility of their struggle. The secretary-general continued to devote his full energies to their problem. Though he was scheduled to leave the U.N. Headquarters with his wife the evening of Dec. 31 for a vacation, he was determined to remain at his desk as long as the slightest chance for a settlement existed.

Finally, a cease-fire was agreed upon late on Dec. 31. This was truly a triumph of the secretary-general’s determination and perseverance. The agreement became his parting achievement, as well as his gift to the new year.

People decide everything. People are the key. People make the difference — whether in achieving peace or ringing in a new age.

Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar carefully read my peace proposals. In a letter responding to my 1983 SGI Day Peace Proposal, he agreed with my position that the individual must play a central role in achieving disarmament.

We must never take the individual lightly. Numbers like 10,000 and 10 million are made up of individuals. To solve the problems we confront today, we need a great global alliance. It can only be created by individuals joining hands in mutual respect. The true enemies of world peace arrogantly look down on individuals, succumb to despair by thinking one person is powerless and scorn and sneer at the individual’s value.

The individual is not powerless. We have many examples to prove this. Immediately

after the first Berlin crisis (1948–49), the beginnings of a peaceful resolution were found in casual conversation among U.S. and U.S.S.R. representatives to the United Nations as they happened to pass one another in a hallway. All changes start with some meeting. Seeds that are not sown will never sprout. Though the process may be slow and painstaking, new developments always emerge from face-to-face meetings and discussions.

During the Falklands crisis in 1982, when U.S. negotiators reached an impasse, Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar stepped in. Just when it seemed that he had succeeded in finding a solution, the negotiations collapsed. But he did not despair. He declared that the necessary conditions for an agreement could not be fulfilled then, but that the seeds he had sown would eventually bear fruit.

The job of U.N. secretary-general — as the organization’s first head, Trygve Lie, once said — is the most impossible in the world.

As the guardian of the U.N. Charter, it was Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar’s duty to base his actions on the best interests of all humankind. But when he did so, some nation always criticized him. Member nations usually placed their own interests above the general good. It was particularly difficult, during the Cold War, to gain the support of the United States and the Soviet Union.

For the first half of Mr. Pérez de Cuéllar’s 10-year term (1982–1991), his efforts were shackled by the evils of nationalism. Finally, with the appearance of Mikhail Gorbachev as head of the Soviet Union, the secretary-general’s efforts began to yield tangible results. The end of the Iran–Iraq War, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the independence of Namibia and the peace agreement in Cambodia — these were some of the remarkable successes achieved by this man, who went about his duties with a quiet dedication and commitment.

He never played to the international press. He knew that the kind of flashy declarations that make the evening news lack substance, and worse, they would be likely to offend the parties concerned and lead to a hardening of their positions.

He had no desire to attract attention. In fact, he felt it better to remain out of the limelight as much as possible. He paid no heed to critics, continuing instead to work tenaciously behind the scenes to find solutions to problems facing the world. His lack of personal ambition inspired trust in all. And that trust produced impressive results. People began to speak of the “U.N. Renaissance.”

Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar often said to me that he valued the SGI’s support of the United Nations, because the SGI combines practical activities with strong spiritual support. He called the SGI a model example of what U.N. support should be and expressed great appreciation for our efforts.

He recognized that peace is the foundation of Buddhist thought and believed that the Buddhist message is a strong inspiration to those who love peace. He also perceived a great deal in common between the SGI’s philosophy and the United Nations’ ideals.

The last time we met, in November 1990, he told me that he had begun to read my dialogue with René Huyghe, *Dawn After Dark*. He agreed so completely with what I had written in the introduction that he wished he had written it himself, he said.

In the introduction, I said that the threat to humanity comes not from without but from within. We are destroying our own home, I asserted. And if we are to live happily in this home, each of us has to fundamentally transform how we think and live. It is time, I also said, to stop competing for profit, to stop hating one other and to start loving and supporting one other.

I think Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar also firmly believed that the human race’s travails would never end unless there was spiritual revolution.

After observing Japan for a number of decades, he said that the country was gradually losing its beautiful spiritual and cultural heritage. He was not speaking, he insisted, on external heritage such as mode of dress, but the decline of deeper, internal emotional and spiritual values.

As a nation's spiritual power weakens, so does its resistance to nationalism's evils.

The United Nations may seem remote and distant from the lives of ordinary people, but ordinary people are directly linked to one another by the challenge of overcoming petty nationalism. When human power is amplified, united, it produces a great wave buoying up the giant ship of the United Nations. This is the most basic support of the United Nations. Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar recognized this clearly.

He valued all those who worked closely with him. On his first day, he paid greetings to each and every employee of his staff, even including the messengers. He gave up his private elevator privileges and used the ordinary elevator along with the rest of the staff, much to everyone's astonishment.

It is when you work with a person that you come to know his or her true character.

At the final general assembly before his retirement, all the diplomats present, usually so calm and controlled, rose to give him a standing ovation. It was completely unplanned — a spontaneous outpouring of warmth and affection that seemed to go on forever.

The usually reserved secretary-general was deeply moved, nodding in acknowledgment. It was a moment of triumph for the quiet man named Javier Pérez de Cuéllar.

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1. "Chief of U.N. Lifted Body's Reputation; Retired Pérez de Cuéllar Can Reflect on Diplomatic Success," *The Washington Post*, Jan. 1, 1992.