

EXPERIENCE — ALEX BARDALES, SANTA ROSA, CALIF. STANDING TALL AT THE HAGUE

Alex Bardales from Santa Rosa, attendee of the Hague Appeal for Peace, remains hopeful as he recounts the conference and importance of the SGI's movement for peace.

The 1999 Hague Appeal for Peace is civil society's international conference for global peace. Since it was NGOs and common people for whom this conference existed, the phrase For the people, by the people directly applies. Could you imagine how encouraging it is for the government officials and visiting dignitaries who came to see so many common people — 8,000 to 10,000 — gathered for the cause of global peace? I imagine seeing this group at the Hague Appeal for Peace really gave them hope. These officials include U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, Her Majesty Queen Noor of Jordan, and Muhamed Sacirbey, the Ambassador to the U.N. for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The aim of the conference is to de-legitimize war and violence as a means for solving conflict. Not only is it supported by the major peace figures of the day, including Nobel Peace Prize winners Rigoberta Menchú Tum, the Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, but it also was attended by everyday people, especially those from the Global South and many youth. With such a line-up, I expected to hear the voice of those gathered in the Netherlands Congress Center proclaiming to the world, "Time To Abolish War!"

I was awarded a scholarship from the World Federalist Association of Northern California and attended the conference with my father. My trip to Holland for the Hague Appeal for Peace was the first time I had been outside the North American continent — just going to Holland itself, merely seeing another culture, was a great experience for me.

This five-day conference (May 11–15) was laid out such that in between the opening and closing plenary sessions, there were dozens of core sessions, a film festival, art exhibits, performances, an auditorium for booths and other activities around the city. Generally speaking, these were based on the four "strands": Disarmament, including Nuclear Abolition; Prevention, Resolution and Transformation of Violent Conflict; International Humanitarian and Human Rights Laws and Institutions; and Root Causes of War/Culture of Peace. As is self-evident, many issues overlap in these four strands. In addition to these activities, the participants met with other attendees from around the world and formed friendships.

Since returning to the United States, many have asked me about my experience. The aforementioned Kofi Annan says that "Telling the story is as important as making the story!" I wish I could begin by showing you the full 80 pages of the conference program of activities. Or give you a tour of The Netherlands Congress Center, the Congresgebouw, the building where the conference was held. Actually, this building was so large and had so many rooms that one time I got lost! I also wish I could show you all the young faces in the crowd that gathered in the Congress Center.

Instead I'll offer a report on two of them. In support of the film festival, I went to the one of the first screenings of Punitive Damage, a documentary about East Timor, the island nation where one-third of the population has died at the hands of the Indonesian military regime. This film included interviews from American reporters who got caught filming part of a democratic movement. Guns aimed at their heads, they repeatedly yelled, "Americans!

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We're Americans" to convince the Indonesian soldiers where they came from. Unlike other reporters, their nation of origin, they said, saved their lives: The soldiers didn't want to harm citizens of the country that supplied their weapons.

On another day I went to a session titled "Nonviolent Conflict Resolution Between States and Unrepresented Nations." One of the speakers was José Ramos-Horta of East Timor who won the Nobel Peace Prize for fighting for the East Timorese. Another speaker, Nalani Minton of Hawaii, commented that out of the world's 7,000 languages, there are 12 that the world's majority uses. These 12, she said, are the colonial languages. When I heard this phrase colonial language, for a moment I felt ashamed to be a speaker of a colonial language. I come from a country whose majority speaks the most dominant of colonial languages, even though there are so many languages brought here by immigrants. Is it time that Americans start to learn other languages so that we might better communicate with others in our own country and even the rest of the world? Whether or not this is so, I was happy to hear such a comment because it has stayed in my mind ever since.

Although I felt honored to attend such a magnificent conference, there was a period after the conference in which I did not know how to respond to the people who asked me about my trip. Of course, this was agitated by the semester finals that took place the following week. When my dad went to a session on the International Criminal Court, José Ramos-Horta began by relating an interview he had given that morning. The interviewer asked, "Are you hopeful, Mr. Ramos-Horta, about the future?" Citing the many crimes against humanity that happen today, issues such as civil wars, military dictatorships, biological and chemical warfare, land mines, and, of course, nuclear weapons, he simply replied that "No," he wasn't hopeful.

Even though I was already aware of most of the issues brought up at the conference, I began to take everything into account and realized that I really didn't know what to do about the future. Shouldn't the hallmark of youth be that they still have hope? Yet when I came back from the conference I told more than a few people that it appears like there is no hope. That's the way it seemed to me. On the last day of my stay in the Hague, the day before my plane left, I came home to the local chapter leaders' house to chant because of this feeling. Therefore, in addition to the incredible positive energy of the conference, it also left me with the burden of how to remain hopeful.

However, because Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is a philosophy of hope, there was nowhere better for me to park myself than in front of the Gohonzon. Even though I told quite a few people that it seemed too late to be hopeful, I have decided that I have to be optimistic, no matter what. I came to this decision through the encouragement of many of my SGI friends.

SGI President Ikeda says that what's important "is that you resolve to become the 'sun'" (Discussions on Youth, vol. 1, p. 33). For me to have regained my hopeful spirit has partially been the challenge of many friends in faith, and to them I offer my gratitude. To state the obvious, this conference has helped me to stand up taller and prouder in my Buddhist practice.

From the beginning of my stay in the Hague, I was meeting SGI members. On the day of my arrival, I went to the home of the Hague chapter leaders. It was here, the pleasant house on Fredrik Hendriklaan (Lane), where I came to know the Beckers family—Kiyomi, Maarten and their children—so well that they seemed like friends whom I had known for

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many years.

Two women were happily carrying out some last minute preparation for the big conference. I could only imagine what type of activities that they had been involved in during the previous weeks in their desire to support this magnificent peace conference. And with most of the SGI members whom I met, this was a scene that I saw over and over again: diligently supporting the conference in whatever way they could without, as far as I could tell, any desire for personal recognition. The SGI-Holland members left me with a fine impression. They have such a wonderful spirit to not begrudge their lives and to support from behind the scenes.

Doesn't this go to show how important our SGI movement is? Since the Hague Appeal for Peace addressed many root causes of war, isn't the Hague Agenda for Peace a document that each SGI member can support, be it directly or indirectly? Can't this be accomplished by allowing people the opportunity to overcome their sufferings, by introducing friends to the philosophy of Nichiren Daishonin? I think it's the most certain way to deal with the root cause of war.

If there is anything that the conference has left me with, it is the conviction that any peace movement must begin with the happiness of the individual. And this is not just my opinion, or that of the SGI: At the conference, Kofi Annan expressed this very statement. I think others are coming to this same conclusion as the modern peace-making techniques are repeatedly proving themselves to be incapable.

For example, in spite of the economic sanctions, peace treaties or other anti-conflict agreements, in spite of the supposed dissuasion factor of nuclear arsenals or biological weapons, there are still conflict zones, killing fields, around the world and our environment continues to suffer. In other words, this conference helped me to realize how much more basic and fundamental is the SGI's movement for peace.

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