

**A RECORD OF MY LIFE
BY DAISAKU IKEDA
UNITED NATIONS: BORN FROM THE TRAGEDY OF WAR**

‘It is easy to criticize the United Nations as ineffective and redundant,’ writes SGI President Ikeda. ‘But it is essential to remember that the United Nations, born from the tragedy of two world wars, is the world’s sole parliament of humankind.’

The autumn breeze blowing amid the skyscrapers also etched ripples into the surface of the Hudson River. The trees of Central Park spurred images of old Musashino [an area of western Tokyo once known for its natural beauty]. Standing in stark contrast to such living poetry, the national flags of countries worldwide encircling the parliament of humankind appeared somehow forlorn.

On Oct. 14, 1960, I visited the U.N. Headquarters in New York. The 15th U.N. General Assembly was in regular session, and I had the opportunity to observe both committee and plenary proceedings that day.

I was particularly impressed by the vibrant expressions worn by the representatives of the various African states present as they energetically moved about the lobby and the conference chamber. The countries of Africa, having only just gained their independence after a long period of colonial rule, were faced with many difficult problems in such areas as politics, economics, education and human rights. But many of the leaders I saw that day were youthful, brimming with fresh energy and the pride of having won their independence.

Images of then Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev standing at the podium waving his large arms and pounding the table as he harshly condemned the United States and the Western camp were broadcast from this General Assembly meeting throughout the world. The rebuttals of Western bloc representatives, who took Khrushchev’s attack as an intentional provocation, were also aired. That was two years before the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, which shook the entire world.

The supposedly easing tensions between the Eastern and Western blocs took a turn for the worse, and the icy storm of conflicting ideologies began to rage anew. Incensed by the mayhem that proceeded to engulf the session, the chairman pounded his gavel and declared a recess. In his fury, he struck the gavel with such force that it broke.

I visited the U.N. Headquarters the day after Khrushchev and his party returned to their country. At the time, I thought to myself: “The Cold War between East and West has grown volatile. But even though an end is not in sight, that day will surely come — no, that day *must* come, no matter what.”

That was my first overseas trip. The Soka Gakkai had not yet been recognized internationally. It was only the beginning of our global activities. I was determined, nevertheless, to construct a people’s movement for peace in order to see that dream realized.

Later, in conjunction with the SGI’s inauguration in January 1975, we began promoting activities in support of the United Nations. I again visited the U.N. Headquarters that January to present a petition with 10 million signatures collected by the Soka Gakkai youth division calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons. The sheets of signatures, which had been gathered at a time when people’s memories of the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were fading, measured almost two-and-a-half inches thick per

10,000. Stacked all together, the 10 million signatures had a thickness of more than 216 feet. In bound form, they filled 1,144 volumes. At the United Nations, I directly presented three of these volumes to the secretary-general.

I have also submitted proposals on three separate occasions to special sessions of the U.N. General Assembly on Disarmament, which first convened in 1978. These include a proposal to the third special session submitted in June 1988 calling for the initiation of a “U.N. Decade of Peace and Disarmament” leading up to the 21st century, in order to heighten awareness of the issue of disarmament and ensure its realization.

I further proposed that a ministry of peace be set up in each country to foster a global current of popular opinion in favor of the movement. I am only a private citizen, but through voicing what I felt needed to be said, I hoped to give my support to the United Nations’ efforts to reduce arms worldwide.

Many years have passed since my first visit to the U.N. Headquarters. The international body has at last begun to recognize the importance of nongovernmental organizations, which aim to advance the interests of humankind, going beyond the level of national interest. Things have changed to the extent that the U.N. top brass now listens to the suggestions of private citizens.

I have had the opportunity to meet and hold dialogues with a number of U.N. secretary-generals. One of these was Dr. Javier Pérez de Cuellar, the fifth secretary-general, whose upright demeanor exudes genuine nobility and candor. When we met in Tokyo in November 1990, I recited a poem from his native Peru to provide him with a momentary respite from his exhausting duties. In response, this cultured individual immediately launched into a discussion of the beauty of Japanese haiku.

I have also met a number of times with Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the sixth secretary-general of the United Nations. He describes himself as having spent half of his life with a view of the Nile. He is a strong-willed, optimistic person. His bright eyes, which are forever smiling, must be a gift of that mighty river.

I met both former U.N. secretary-generals four times each.

Josei Toda held profound expectations for the United Nations.

In an interesting coincidence, my mentor Josei Toda’s release from prison, on July 3, 1945, nearly coincided with the signing of the U.N. Charter, on June 26 the same year. Mr. Toda, who called for a global citizenship and who keenly sensed the need for organizations that transcend the framework of the state, held profound expectations for the United Nations. [At a youth division meeting in February 1952, Mr. Toda declared that the extension of his thought lay in the idea of global citizenship, a philosophy of universal humanism that transcends all distinctions of nationality, ethnicity and ideology.]

“The United Nations is the crystallization of the wisdom of the 20th century,” he would state emphatically. “This stronghold of hope must be resolutely protected and cultivated toward the next century.”

Mr. Toda had closely watched Japan as it withdrew from the League of Nations in 1933 and proceeded toward war. He had also experienced the loss of his mentor, first Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, who had died in prison after being incarcerated under Japan’s Peace Preservation Law, which attempted to control people’s thoughts, so the war effort could be carried out. His expectations of the United Nations were thus all the higher.

As a Buddhist, and in keeping with my mentor’s instructions, I have consistently taken action to promote the United Nations as a central governing body for the world. Many of

the intellectuals and world leaders with whom I have met over the years have also subscribed to this view.

These include André Malraux, the French thinker and activist who is said to have lived a hundred lives for all that he accomplished. During our discussions, his light-green eyes glimmered sharply as he remarked, “The United Nations is a stage of specters.” In his caustic way of expression, he was voicing his desire to see the United Nations working actively for world peace.

There was also Arnold J. Toynbee, whom I met at his Oakwood Court apartment complex in London. Everything at the time was bathed in the serene sunshine of May. We sat next to each other on the sofa in his guestroom. At one point, Dr. Toynbee slapped my knee and firmly stated: “The United Nations may still be incomplete in many areas, but it is our only hope for peace. The only way to unify and bring harmony to humankind is by supporting and fostering the United Nations through patience and tenacity.”

And there was the American entrepreneur Armand Hammer, who was constantly crisscrossing the globe, working as a bridge between the United States and the Soviet Union. He spoke ardently of the need to ease tensions between East and West, and of his expectations for the United Nations. This great individual of more than 90 years burned with intense passion.

It was cold out the evening we met and, being the native of Russia that he was, he joked that it was “a night that makes you want your samovar.” I also remember a time early one summer when, during a stopover in the course of one of his overseas trips, Dr. Hammer chartered a helicopter from Tokyo Narita International Airport to pay me a visit at Soka University.

Protecting the United Nations is the correct path toward peace.

There are certainly many large hurdles yet to overcome. And it is easy to criticize the United Nations as ineffective and redundant. But it is essential to remember that the United Nations, born from the tragedy of two world wars, is the world’s sole parliament of humankind.

In June 1999, I met with former U.N. under-secretary-general Yasushi Akashi, a long-time acquaintance. He is the first Japanese to become a U.N. official and also the first Japanese under-secretary-general. Mr. Akashi is also well known for his activities as head of the U.N. Transitional Authority in Cambodia. Having met him many times before, I can say that he is an international person who carries himself with a cool composure and inner fortitude characteristic of those from Akita Prefecture in northern Japan.

Based on his 40-year experience as an international civil servant, he stresses that the advantages and disadvantages of the United Nations should be measured with an “extra-long yardstick.” There is no other international organization or country capable of handling global issues, he shares, adding that to reject the United Nations is as productive as “spitting at the sky.”

I felt his comment that an “extra-long yardstick” should be used was most appropriate. It is important not to be caught up in immediate matters but to look at things with a long-term perspective.

When we look ahead with our eyes wide open, the path along which we need to advance comes naturally into view. I believe it vital to protect the United Nations at all costs and to promote its further development. This is the correct path toward peace.

Thirteen in a series