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Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon General Assembly

14 September 2012

Remarks to opening session of the General Assembly High-Level Forum on the Culture of Peace

I thank the President of the General Assembly for bringing us together for this important Forum.

When we look at the suffering in our world, we know how urgently we need a culture of peace.

Fighting in Syria is taking a terrible toll on civilians. In Timbuktu, Mali, sacred sites are under attack.

In Libya and elsewhere in recent days, we have seen terrible attacks and unrest. There is no justification for such killing and brutality. A hateful, disgusting film appears to have sparked the violence. It is shameful to exploit the fundamental right to free expression by deliberately provoking bigotry and bloodshed. It is also wrong to exploit the anger; this only feeds the cycle of recrimination and senseless violence.

At a time of tension, we need calm and reason.

Around the world, the economic crisis is exacerbating xenophobia and other forms of dangerous – and deadly – discrimination.

Terrorism, human trafficking, rights abuses and violence against women threaten millions of people.

War causes the largest-scale destruction ... but even in countries at peace, senseless violence takes too many lives.

I have made a point of listening to the victims. Here is what they are saying:

They are exhausted from war. They are angered and impoverished by decisions to spend on military weapons at the expense of health, education and the future. And they are crying out for a culture of peace.

People intuitively understand that there can be no military solution to conflicts ... that the world's scarce resources should be spent to help people flourish, not to fund weapons that cause more suffering.

But too many decision makers do not get this simple logic. The world spends almost twice as much on weapons in one day than the United Nations spends for our global mission of peace, human rights and development in one year.

\$1.7 trillion dollars was spent last year on weapons. That is an enormous cost to people who go to bed hungry ... children who die because they lack clean water... farmers who cannot till land because it is polluted by mines.

Economists call this an "opportunity cost". I call it a moral outrage.

I have made disarmament a key priority in the UN's five-year action agenda.

We are emphasizing prevention.

But let me stress that prevention means more than separating warring parties and cooling tensions.

To fundamentally tackle the roots of conflict, we need to promote an understanding of our common humanity. We need a culture that upholds human dignity and human life.

We are here to talk about how to create this culture of peace.

I have a simple, one-word answer: education.

Through education, we teach children not to hate.

Through education, we raise leaders who act with wisdom and compassion.

Through education, we establish a true, lasting culture of peace.

Next week, I will launch a new global initiative called Education First. The aim is to bring together all partners. We want to give every child the chance to attend school. We want them to have quality lessons. And we want to strengthen their core values.

This is how we build a culture of peace.

Governments must lead. But ultimately, a culture of peace will be built by people: teachers and religious figures, parents and community leaders, business executives and grass-roots groups.

All joining together to denounce violence and demand peace.

Several years ago, the United Nations hosted an exhibition on this subject.

It featured the words of Ralph Bunche, the Nobel Peace Laureate and United Nations Under-Secretary-General.

He said: "The world has had ample evidence that war begets only conditions that beget further war."

I would only add that peace begets conditions that beget further understanding, solidarity and compassion. That is why your work is so important.

I will be listening to your discussions with great interest. I will report on them at next week's High Level Debate on the Culture of Peace and Non-Violence in the General Assembly.

These meetings are our opportunity to capture the spirit of a culture of peace that is growing in houses of worship, in schools, in communities and in homes – and to spread this sense of solidarity around the world.

Thank you.