

Time and Date: 13:15-14:45 pm, 8 September 2005
Place: Room No. 8, UN HQ, New York
Occasion: The 58th DPI/NGO Annual Conference
Workshop: Human Rights and Dignity for All: Youth Engagement in the Peace Process

**“Grass-roots Encounters between African and Japanese Peoples”
– In Search of True Richness –**

8 September 2005

Rissho Kosei-kai Peace Fund

Distinguished leaders building peace from different parts of communities, workshop participants, ladies and gentlemen concerned about the peace process.

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to present our message today.

This workshop is entitled “Human Rights and Dignity for All: Youth Engagement in the Peace Process.”

How wonderful it would be if All can live with human dignity and with their human rights fully secured.

At the UN we have the Millennium Development Goals established and various world-scale projects are being promoted. It is very meaningful to evaluate the degrees of success of those projects by quantitative objectives. It is even epoch-making to do so.

At the same time, however, we must recognize that those objectives are the minimum necessary achievement goals for human survival and to maintain the dignity of people whose lives are threatened.

Furthermore, we have to ask ourselves a question. “Can we expect to eradicate “poverty” immediately and realize richness and peace by achieving those quantitative objectives?”

If we look into a deeper meaning of the word “Poverty” it goes beyond a lack of material abundance.

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Instead, it encompasses problems of social systems as well as of hearts and minds of people. From this perspective we recognize “Poverty” existing both in the developed and developing countries.

For example, Japan has developed many social services through its flourishing economy. And yet many Japanese people became apathetic with their neighbors. Sometimes we even don’t recognize our own neighbor’s death due to illness or age for one week!

Look at the increasing number of people who kill themselves. More than thirty thousand (30,000) people have committed suicide on average annually in the past six (6) years.

I think both developed and developing countries have their own richness and poverty.

I cannot think of a single nation to be modeled after throughout the world. This I mean there is no country on the surface of the earth where material and spiritual beings are in harmony and the “True Richness” is realized.

Here comes our big question:

“What can we individual citizens, especially young generations, do to engage ourselves in the process of building a human community where people can share the “True Richness”?

Rissho Kosei-kai, a non-monastic Buddhist organization in Japan, has been conducting “Donate A Meal Campaign” as a movement for peace led by the youth.

Our members skip their meals several times a month to experience hunger and think about the sufferings of people around the world.

Then, they donate moneys saved by skipping meals with their prayers for peace.

The aggregate sum of these donations amounts to almost three-point-six (3.6) million dollars US in one year.

The essence of the “Donate A Meal Campaign” is [to cherish “lives” of all sentient beings and cherish the inter-relatedness of each others’ lives] and

[to disseminate the sharing ways of life to as many people as possible so that we can live together].

This “Donate A Meal Campaign” led to the creation of a fund called “Rissho Kosei-kai Peace Fund” that allowed us to carry out:

- (1) cooperative development works and humanitarian aids with tie-ups with domestic and international NGOs
- (2) distribution of hand-crafted gifts to children in conflict zones around the world
- (3) monetary donations to UN agencies
- (4) emergency relief actions in case of natural disasters, etc.

More than ninety-one (91) million dollars US has been spent for these actions.

In addition, we have carried out annual street collections of donations throughout Japan.

This enabled us to donate tens of million dollars US to UNICEF.

In search for true richness, I am going to talk about the “Campaign for Sharing Blankets” as an example of grass-roots encounters and sharing between Japanese and African peoples.

This campaign has its roots in the “Donate A Meal Campaign” I have just mentioned and Rissho Kosei-kai has actively participated in this movement in the past 21 years.

“Campaign for Sharing Blankets” has been carried out with two wishes.

Needless to say, one is our wish [to respond to the humanitarian needs of people in Africa].

The other is our wish [to develop interests in Africa and its people among Japanese citizens and nurture their hearts and minds to share with other people].

This campaign began in response to the UN emergency call for 2 million blankets from around the world in 1984 when Africa was struck by a devastating drought and many people lost their lives.

There are many areas in Africa where the ambient temperatures reach almost

40 degrees centigrade and drops to below 10 degrees at night.
In such areas blankets are precious in protecting the lives of people whose physical strength have weakened by poverty.

Even after 1984 the needs for blankets continued in various parts of Africa. The Japanese NGO group including Rissho Kosei-kai with cooperation by the Japanese government and the UN has sent about three-point-four (3.4) million blankets up till today to the people in more than twenty (20) countries in Africa in twenty-one (21) years.

In 2004 we distributed blankets in countries including Ethiopia, Malawi, Uganda and Sierra Leone.

These blankets have been collected within Japan.

A nation-wide collection campaign is carried out every year where our members centering the youth canvass from door-to-door in the neighborhood. About one-hundred and twenty (120) thousand blankets have been donated by Japanese citizens this year.

Every single blanket has a piece of cloth with the donor's message of friendship sewn to it.

The blankets are sent to Africa by sea and distributed to people with the cooperation of local Red Cross and NGOs.

Financial assistance is given from the "Rissho Kosei-kai Peace Fund of Donate A Meal Campaign" to aid the transport.

Many of those blankets are ones used by the donors at home.

Raising funds to purchase blankets in Africa will also be an effective method. However, the act of donating one's own important article of blanket has stimulated interests in Africa by many Japanese citizens and nurtured their hearts and mind to share their belongings with people in Africa.

Every year, we also organize a volunteer team of about 30 Rissho Kosei-kai members including many young people to visit Africa and distribute blankets in person.

By making actual visits to hand over the blankets face to face with African people our team members deliver love of the donors embedded in individual pieces of blankets.

When Japanese young people visit local areas in Africa they encounter not just poverty.

Rather, they often encounter richness of African people.

Let me give you an example.

One day we visited a village to distribute blankets.

Soon we realized that there were many who had wanted to receive blankets.

And yet the number of blankets we had was insufficient.

We had to give priorities to vulnerable people who were ill, handicapped, aged, child, pregnant, etc.

Consequently, the number of people who did not receive blankets and just had to watch others to receive might have been far greater than the number of people who received ones.

It was noteworthy in that village that we seldom saw people who were sad or angry because of not receiving a blanket.

Instead, so many were happy for others who did receive and blessed them despite the fact that they themselves did not receive ones.

Young people in the village volunteered to help handing blankets to the handicapped or aged. We were so moved in watching the villagers who acted like members of one large family.

This visit gave us a refreshed teaching that gentle compassion and solidarity are precious elements for man to conduct a rich life.

People in Africa also responded by expressing their true joy of receiving us from a far away country of Japan.

An elder leader whom we met in a village in northern Ethiopia said,

“I am happy to see you Japanese coming in person this far. These blankets are expressions of your friendship and the symbol of love and hope. I pray for a wonderful future to come through the meeting of our cultures. Let’s cooperate with each other and prosper together.”

Members of our Japanese volunteer team learn through their encounters with villagers in Africa who live in a stringent natural environment trying to fight their poverty.

Our members are deeply impressed by their dignity and gentleness and the ways they help with each other.

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Our members are also impressed by local NGO staff members' spirit of service to humanity. Many young members reflect upon themselves and their own lives through these experiences and hold study meetings about Africa upon return to their local areas.

Some make appeals through mass media about the situations in Africa and further promote the Campaign for Sharing Blankets.

Still some others realize how the "Donate A Meal Campaign" made it possible to deliver blankets to people in Africa and helped those who were in need.

Consequently they had an increased vigor in engaging themselves in the "Donate A Meal Campaign" and more importantly in encouraging others to join the movement.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think grass-roots encounters between the youth of Africa and Japan through peace activities offer real opportunities for mutual learning about many important things.

Such encounters with mutual sense of respect may provide them with opportunities to work together and search for their "True Richness" in life.

I believe that realization of the world with "True Richness" requires us to respect each other's individual personalities, accept and appreciate cultural diversities, and share the limited resources given by the nature while exchanging sympathy and compassion to live together.

Today, I have introduced to you the "Donate A Meal Campaign" and the "Campaign for Sharing Blankets with African people" as an example of the Japanese youth engagement in the process of building the world with truly rich characteristics.

Ladies and gentlemen, how about starting your own new life style of sharing by skipping meals or saving some consumption a few times a month and think about the peoples in today's world who live in poverty and donate the moneys saved to build peace?

The moneys will fund the youth around the world to encounter with each other while engaging in the peace process and learn about ways to reach the "True Richness" in the world.

May I conclude my talk by saying,

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“Isn’t this a peace process you can engage yourself Anytime, Anywhere,
Whoever you are, and Forever?”

May god bless you and benevolence and compassion of the Buddha be with
you.

Thank you.

The Rissho Kosei-kai Peace Fund