

INTERNATIONAL SEMINARS ON PLANETARY EMERGENCIES

*28th Session
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Opening Session

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TERRORISM AS A CULTURAL PROBLEM

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The theme of the 28th Session of the International Seminars was Ecology while, last year in August, the main theme of the 27th Session of the World Federation of Scientists' International Seminars on Planetary Emergencies was dedicated to the Cultural Emergency and centred on Terrorism.

It was an all-out multidisciplinary effort of our "hard sciences" community, to try and apprehend the various root causes and consequences of Terrorism, in an attempt to contribute to recommendations and solutions.

We all considered then that the August Seminar would be a first and there would be a need for a more focused seminar sometime in May 2003 – and that was before we even knew there would be a Moscow, a Bali and a Mombassa. Certainly before we knew there would be a war in Iraq.

So here we are, meeting again as a dedicated group, a bit overwhelmed by the frightening acceleration of events since our August meeting, which confirmed our worst fears.

Without wanting to sound too pessimistic, we believe that the need to identify the motivations for and the mechanisms of terrorist acts, as well as guarding against them, has become even more essential.

Our hope, of course, is that the voice of our international congregation of scientists will make itself heard amidst the clamor of confusing arguments being presented by various parties.

We will have a chance for this now.

As indicated on the Programme you were remitted on arrival, the Seminar will start with three plenary sessions, followed by dedicated parallel sessions for constituted Working Groups and Subgroups.

The main Working Groups and topics are:

Topics Workgroup I – Motivations, chaired by Ambassador A. Kamal, with subgroups:

A/ Social – Culture and Religion – Equity Aspects, led by Ambassador A. Kamal,

B/ Territorial and Economical Aspects, led by Professor K. C. Sivaramakrishnan, and

C/ Psychological Aspects, led by Professor G. Mirdal.

Topics Workgroup II – Tools and Countermeasures, chaired by Professor A.R. Mason, on Preventive and Defensive Countermeasures.

Topics Work Group III - Worldwide Stability, chaired by Professor Terence Taylor, on the status of worldwide stability - mechanisms and proposals.

On 21 November 1997, in my report to the General Assembly of the ICSC – World Laboratory, as I was enumerating the changes which had occurred during the last ten years, I ended by saying. “... and the United States of America found themselves in the role of the biggest-by-far power on this planet,” and I added “a very difficult role indeed”. About 2000 years ago this role belonged to the Roman Empire.

We all knew it would be difficult but never dreamed it would be so difficult, and that there would be so little time for the US to be perceived as a well-meaning father figure to the rest of the planet.

There is a very thin dividing line between the perception of a father image and a tyrant, and that perception is **mostly cultural**.

After the disintegration of the USSR, the situation required strong charismatic leadership by the only remaining superpower.

However, no one was impressed by the way the situation was handled during the last ten years of grace, and that was the first missed opportunity.

Many opportunities have been lost since, to try and make a better world to live in, but I'll mention just one.

Already back in 1990, a sizable portion of the world had rallied behind the US for the first Iraqi war.

After Nine Eleven, the whole world, this time, strongly supported and co-operated with the US. And between that time and the Afghanistan war, the second major opportunity to build a peaceful world seems to have been lost.

Today, after the second Iraqi war, we have altercations between old trusted allies, crowds numbering in the hundred thousands marching in most capitals and fear, if not open hatred, of the industrialised world expressed in many developing countries.

The least we can say is that we're not doing too well. Where have we gone wrong?

There are some who say that this may be due to satellite TV airing scenes of destruction, death and mutilated children alternating with programmes where our Western leisurely way of life is caricaturised to excess.

Others say that intimidation, engaging in name-calling and/or the “punishment” of countries that do not share our values have been counterproductive.

Finally, that denying the people of a country the form of government they wish to democratically elect is a thing that belongs to the past.

Everything nowadays points to our lacks in terms of Culture. And when I say Culture, of course I include Scientific Culture. How can we afford to criticize, sometimes in the strongest possible terms, the political regime of certain countries when our own democratic political systems have shown their limitations?

Not for lack of being fully democratic, but because that same democracy allows the existence of an incredible number of means to bypass laws, influence the political forces as well as the public at large.

That cannot be helped since we wouldn't dream of abandoning our democratic ways, but we should all be aware that the practices I mentioned, which limit our democracy, and the dictatorial regimes at large can only be combated by an increase in the cultural level of our populations.

These may be some of the elements that might explain the present situation but I shall not elaborate on this any further, as it is only one of the aspects we need to examine during this seminar.

Before closing I would like to quote what the President of the Italian Republic said a few days ago at an important meeting. Namely, that we Europeans whose age, like mine, is such that we perfectly recollect the Second World War, could not imagine being anti-American. Because, were it not for the US, there would be a picture of either Hitler or Stalin hanging in this hall today!

Therefore we, Europeans, cannot feel anti-American in any way. We only want to see that this first empire of the modern world - our present world - is modelled with a strong cultural component distinguishing our values from those that caused such terrible tragedies in the past.

Now I would like to thank you for your attention and turn the floor over to Ambassador Kamal.