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Commentary

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Commentary

Africa

Women in the aftermath of civil war

Over and over again, women speak of violence in their experiences of war, of how war entrenches violence in their communities, of 'how women and men look at the same war, see its effects, experience its ravages, sustain hopes for the future through entirely different gendered lenses'.¹ Societies become militarised in civil war, and this militarisation is institutionalised afterwards in the terms of the truce. The military sow a culture of violence in long wars that is hard to eradicate. This violence makes life difficult and dangerous for women, especially with the diffusion of cheap small arms. And violence against women does not stop when treaties are signed to end the war; on the contrary, violence escalates, including domestic violence. What can women do to protect themselves during conflict and in the aftermath? How can they work to prevent violence? How can they help each other heal from the trauma?

We organised two meetings to discuss these issues. In the first, a group of twenty-five women opposed to war travelled from Liberia, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa and the United States to Dakar to discuss these questions over three days, from 11 to 13 December 1998. The second meeting, held in Johannesburg from 20 to 22 July 1999, gathered together seventy-five activist and academic participants from sixteen African countries and from national and international nongovernmental organisations, as well as United Nations agencies.

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The participation of women activists and scholars from Eastern Asia, Europe, Africa and the Caribbean was very important and provided an opportunity for the participants to develop broader international perspectives on the interplay between gender (gender politics), war and its aftermath. The conference organisers call on activists (from within or outside conflict zones), women's NGOs and academics was intended as a forum for meaningful interaction and dialogue, leading to the construction of a truthful women's language of solidarity and to balanced actions against war and women's oppressions throughout the world. The aim was to transcend identitarian politics and hidden vested interests and pave the way for concrete mobilisation for a common cause. This was also an attempt to reduce the international isolation of women which prevents them from learning about (and from one another) fundamental issues related to gender oppression or empowerment in peace or wartime. Such isolation also keeps women (nationally and internationally) distant from one another and, as a result, intensifies suspicion and lack of cooperation in confronting and defeating the common enemies embodied in economic and political imperialism, patriarchy and class (nationally and internationally). In this article, we try to capture the essence of those discussions and our own reactions. We had more questions than answers.

Violence against women

Social, psychological and interpersonal violence are the forms of violence that women most frequently cite. Understanding violence against women as private and individualised is a formalistic response. Accepting that violence is socially and structurally produced and sustained can result in politically transformative responses. Context, strategies and available resources all shape our understanding of violence, as well as our comprehension of the parts of our identity being violated. Other forms of violence that affect women are the economic violence of military budgets which deprive them of education and health services; the political violence of token appointments which undermine equality; and cultural violence which uses religion, tradition and custom to deprive women of new liberatory identities, the symbolic meanings that enrich their lives, and the security that makes creative life possible.

All forms of violence against women escalate in wartime: when the economy goes underground, rebel male soldiers 'live off the land', which is to say that they survive by preying upon, stealing from and dispossessing women. When armed men kill women's male kin, women and children can be rendered stateless. High levels of social violence

can hide the effects of gender violence, which predates war and continues in peacetime; social violence can render women passive in the aftermath. The social violence that occurs during and after conflict can be described in a typology of violence, but it is important to note that the violence inflicted on women is different from that to which men are subjected: the violence against women is both explicitly and implicitly sexual. Explicit sexual violence includes systematic rape (men use rape as a way to dishonour and humiliate not just women, but the enemy group); forced pregnancy (to leave the enemy's marker); shooting women through the vagina (rendering women infertile and ensuring the end of the group's ability to reproduce); forcing children to witness their mother's rape; gang rape; mutilation of women's limbs; cutting open the pregnant womb and killing the fetus; sexual slavery; and forced labour.

We need to understand rape as a socially constructed experience. The intensity of the trauma is partly dependent on the response of society. German society, for example, did not blame women for the mass rapes that occurred in Berlin at the end of the second world war; instead it offered women abortion on demand and, as a result, minimised both the physical and psychological trauma. In Rwanda, society's rejection of raped women intensified their trauma.

Implicit sexual violence includes the abandonment of women left to fend for themselves and their children; harassment and intimidation by police and military; vulnerability to opportunistic men (bandits, rapists, thieves); discrimination by social and governmental institutions (denial of access to media); forced prostitution (which increases in the aftermath of conflict); silence of leaders on issues of prostitution (which makes them accomplices); dispossession of women by looters (who are protected and vindicated by leaders); verbal abuse and disrespect of women politicians by government and media; denial of access to resources (based on political affiliation); sexual harassment of women who join the armed forces (promotion tied to sexual favours); denial of abortion on demand in cases of pregnancy resulting from systematic rape; rejection of women victims of systematic rape, rejection of children conceived in rape; imprisonment of women of all ages without recourse to justice or outside assistance; and lack of research or reliable documentation on women's condition before, during, and after war (this amounts to a conspiracy of leaders to maintain silence).

Also important is the fact that these forms of sexual violence are not confined to the space directly locked in a civil war. They often follow women across borders to countries of refuge. Somali women in Kenya, Eritrean women in Sudan, Rwandan women in Tanzania, among many other examples, are displaced victims of civil war who continue to be subjected to sexual terror, especially by government security personnel.

Sexuality is centrally located in the motivation of war. Internalised conservatism, arising from cultural and religious values, inhibited most of the participants at the meetings from addressing intimate issues pertaining to sexuality and sex crimes, beyond the superficial mention of incidences of rape or other forms of sexual assault against women and children. As Barry observes, 'sexuality is causal; it is the conclusion; and when transformed, it can be the hope. But what we learn here is more: coming to terms with militarisation, war and peace means confronting the deployment of sexuality through them.'² Yet the ability to confront the interconnectedness between war and sexuality presupposes an atmosphere of open and unhindered discussion of the burning issues among women themselves and, subsequently, between women and the rest of society.

Coming out of the shell of tradition and engaging openly on the place of sexuality in war is equally important to the healing process. And, unless women cast away the dishonour socially imprinted on their sexuality, they cannot hope to educate the rest of society about the nature and the degree of violation of women's humanity that sexual crimes entail.

Healing from the trauma of violence

The trauma of civil-war violence is nearly universal. As one participant joked, 'even the dogs are traumatised and dodge under the bed at every loud noise.' To heal successfully from these extreme experiences is a holistic process that includes sensitisation of the population to create an awareness of the consequences of war and an understanding of the gendered nature of violence. Among the issues that people need to talk about and understand is how patriarchy ties honour to virginity and women's sexuality. The whole community must be awakened to specific issues such as rape. Otherwise, even women who survive rape will be murdered or will die a moral death. For example, some Algerian women raped by combatants were killed by their parents when they returned home.

Healing is anchored in context, and approaches developed by one society are not necessarily appropriate for others. What constitutes normality and how do women renegotiate a more equitable situation in the aftermath? Is there an overwhelming tendency to re-establish pre-war conditions because of insecurity, or does the transition period give women an opportunity to educate, galvanise and mobilise civil society? The challenge to women is how to use the opportunity before new policies are set in law.

Healing is also a multi-dimensional process and needs a multi-pronged approach. Women are not just victims of war, as some aspects of their experiences are empowering and can be used as a resource for

healing and transformation. Healing should not become an additional burden for women: society must recognise women's role as a resource, just as it must acknowledge their resilience. We should identify and document women's roles in the survival and reconstruction of society. We need to empower women's access to different points of healing and to cultural resources. We should also plan for future generations, because one consequence of war is that violence leaves scars and shapes the identity of future generations. War's impact is felt beyond its immediate survivors and can become part of a people's identity (for example, being Jewish or South African or of a 'race').

Healing must go beyond war-centric responses to foster mutual tolerance. How can artificial barriers of ethnicity and religion be transcended? How can women promote solidarity across ethnic and religious lines? Is the Nigerian experiment with a youth service corps, which sends young people out from their home base to serve in other regions, a fruitful exercise in the nation-building agenda and can it be usefully replicated elsewhere? Can national conferences that mediate integration between civilians and the military advance the healing process? In Sierra Leone, members of the disbanded army publicly apologised to the population during a conference; and, on another occasion, a conference brought together wives of ex-combatants to meet with women from centres for displaced persons.

Reconciliation is a necessary but not sufficient step in healing. Political analyses of traumatic experiences must be integrated into the healing process. Treating trauma is not easy, and government assistance is not always forthcoming. The need for governmental response meant that the wish to find ways to heal war trauma was difficult to fulfil. Reflecting on the specific local situations of women in each country, it seemed critical to find creative and appropriate ways to heal in different cases. In one successful experiment, South Africans used wilderness and adventure therapy to reintegrate militarised youth. Some women's groups are taking the initiative where government services are lacking: in Casamance, Senegalese nongovernmental organisations built shelters to help rehabilitate people who were victims of land-mines. Other groups are running orphanages for child victims. But are institutional responses always the best ones? The argument against orphanages is that they alienate children from society; on the other hand, what is to be done when post-conflict economic crises prevent Africans from assuming traditional family responsibilities?

Conference participants came from different class backgrounds, represented different class interests and, as a result, presented different class-based narratives of their war experiences and healing strategies in the aftermath of war. Vested class interests became a constraint on our ability to arrive at a common vision on how to confront both international and local forces that profit from a state of war to the detriment

of women and children. This class factor also blurred the question of 'whose voice' has greater authority in representing women's experience in wartime and in envisioning healing mechanisms in the post-war period. Progressive women in liberation movements present a false contrast with so-called traditional women left behind in rural areas who, it is supposed, do not want to change. Can the 'narrative voice of authority' transcend class boundaries, as long as it is rooted in an 'intellectual' culture? Can it be expressed through written or spoken traditions and through imperial or local tongues?

Women's solidarity is fragile, and loyalties to political parties divide women. In South Africa, the Inkatha Freedom Party Women's League and the ANC Women's League tried to come together. But talks were suspended because of the elections in 1994; women retreated and there was more violence and rape. Organising along party lines prevents women from overcoming political, ethnic and religious divisions, from achieving a definition of peace that is common to all. Openness about the problem of pledging loyalty to destructive war ideologies would be a step towards women's conscientisation on the consequences of their taking positions and lending support to warlords and wars that take such a heavy toll on their lives.

Reconciliation, rehabilitation and reparations

The need for reconciliation in nations emerging from conflict is urgent, but so is the need for repentance and some form of punishment. As one participant said: 'To forgive does not mean to forget, because to forget is to risk a recurrence of events.'

Yet who should be punished and how? Should child soldiers be punished, or are those who recruited them responsible for the violent acts they commit, especially as the children are often coerced or drugged? Is there a need for national consensus on how punishment should be meted out to those who commit atrocities? In some countries, trials and tribunals are part of the healing process, but they often neglect the gender issue. At the outset, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission failed to factor gender into its work: only after prodding from women's groups did the Commission hold two major workshops dealing with gender and hold special hearings that focused on women's experiences. The attitude of the male members of the Commission was 'amused condescension' as they agreed to 'humour the women'.

Ex-combatants need new and different rehabilitation programmes. Attempts at re-education usually take place within the framework of established patriarchal and militaristic cultures. For example, in Niger after the Tuareg rebellion, the government gave ex-combatants four

to six months of re-education and reintegrated them into military, paramilitary, and other societal structures. The success of this rehabilitation programme needs to be carefully interrogated, given that it was engineered by a military regime that violated the rights of citizens to a democratically elected government.

In Sierra Leone, the military became the main employment sector for integrating ex-combatants into normal social life. Women found it hard to return to their villages and face erstwhile rebels and rapists newly installed as the 'security forces'. Yet international agencies are pushing refugees and displaced persons to resettle without adequate provision or protection. Though women often welcome returnees after conflicts, whether the displaced relocate to their original residences or remain where they are at war's end should be their choice. Women and others wishing to return to their original homes after conflict may need new laws to protect them because, in many cases, new occupants harass them and prevent them from resettling.

The use of the military as a rehabilitation model is questionable. In moments of economic crisis when the state fails to meet the material needs of its military and paramilitary personnel, the military has been a source of terror against women and other civilians. Women must ask, therefore, reconciliation and rehabilitation for what, and in whose interests?

Can religious institutions play a useful role in reconciliation by preaching peace, or must they, too, be conscientised first because they can be divisive, as in the case of Sierra Leone? Yet, the Interfaith Mediation Committee of Liberia exemplifies different faiths working together to bring peace. Churches are not always protective of women: they could not protect nuns who were raped in the Congo, and the Catholic Church in Rwanda denied abortions to rape victims. Perhaps women should approach the use of religious bodies as healing mechanisms with caution.

The alleviation of poverty is an integral part of recovery. Reparations are an often overlooked aspect of recovery. Demobilisation programmes usually compensate soldiers and aid them in reintegrating into civilian life, but there is no compensation for women and children, who are not part of the decision to create conflicts and yet suffer the most from violence.

War and post-war shifts in gender relations

Gender roles can shift dramatically in times of conflict and under authoritarian and fascist regimes. These shifts often challenge power structures, especially patriarchal power structures, and they can destabilise interpersonal relations between women and men and between

generations. Some gender-role shifts (for example, when women become heads of households) leave women defenceless, prey to male predators and rapists, vulnerable to the worst kinds of social and economic exploitation. Some power shifts in gender relations give women new opportunities to train, learn skills, and imagine new – more equal – relations with men as comrades, fighters and lovers. In times of conflict, some women step into violent roles traditionally played by men – women become accomplices to rape, murder and torture, but these are not examples of power shifts, though they may involve changes in gender roles. Women who participated in the genocide in Rwanda and women who were instruments of state violence and partisan violence in South Africa were not changing or challenging the relative power of women and men. In these situations, women were instruments of an old order.

To understand war/post-war shifts in gender relations, we must examine several dimensions of reconstruction and transformation. For example, dramatic demographic shifts occur in wartime and have an impact on gender relations: the ratio of men to women changes as more men than women die; the age structure of the population alters as more younger than older adults die; the number of widows and female-headed households increases; and in the aftermath there is often a rise in polygamous marriages and the birth rate. Economic changes can be equally dramatic – changes in the Gini coefficient (which measures income inequality) showing greater disparities, the growth of landlessness, especially among women, and the expansion of the informal sector as the formal sector and the number of jobs shrink. This terrain is especially fruitful for socially imaginative policy-making.

While common practices and experiences unite women, positive transformations that occur during war do not necessarily continue in the post-war period. Several factors act as obstacles to the transformation of wartime experiences into peacetime empowerment. First, women's issues are not on the national agenda; second, war compromises women's ability to communicate and be represented; and third, bureaucratic sabotage hinders women's advancement. Education is a key to empowerment but, while information may be empowering, male control of information can negatively affect women. A related issue is men's misunderstanding of security – it is not simple protection from harm but, rather, encompasses development. Women want a new framework for human security based on human needs, the environment, human rights and dignity. Women's access to productive resources, which affect reconstruction and healing initiatives, is as much a security issue as land-mines.

To combat the observation that women's organisations are not prepared to meet many of the post-war challenges, we need strategies

that focus on making women agents of change. Women need leadership workshops, certification of skills gained during war (such as learning to drive trucks), the creation of women's empowerment units in government, and new land legislation that gives women equal property rights.

New identities of war

The Dakar workshop never satisfactorily addressed the question of identity, which kept cropping up in various guises such as ethnicity and in questions regarding intermarriage. How do women – of different cultures, religions, politics, social and economic classes – project and reconstruct their personal and group identity (or identities) across the language and discourse of war? Civil society poses new challenges to the problem of identification with the nation, creates discontinuities in post-colonial nation-building in Africa, and foregrounds a variety of sub-nationalist identities that draw on ethnic, religious or other ideologies. These reconfigured identities pose special problems in intermarriage, in resettlement and in reconciliation.

Participants in the Johannesburg conference concluded that identities are not singular or fixed in time and space, but multiple, gendered and contextual. War decimates men's as well as women's identities, and men may have fewer alternative empowering identities to draw on (for example, has recent work on fatherhood provided men with a positive identity in the way that new thinking about motherhood has done?). Women's and men's identities are not defined in binary opposition to each other, nor is women's empowerment a zero-sum game. We should look at how alternative identities are created (for example, by examining aspects of lesbianism). We should ask about constructions of masculine identity in war and peace and about alternative male discourses beyond conscientious objection and community service alternatives to military service. The South African sociologist Jacklyn Cock found that women contribute to the construction of wartime masculinity, even quite traditional women not overtly engaged in the war effort. Military structures also imbue the identity of peacetime services – for example, public health workers may carry military rank, and some nursing services are violently hierarchical.

Protecting women, preventing violence

What is the responsibility of the state in protecting women and children? What are the responsibilities of citizens? Should women look for protection to such social forces as human rights organisations, or should they rely on defence forces, the army and police? Can African women's organisations effectively put pressure on international human

rights organisations and on states through solidarity with other national and international agencies?

A main objective of the Johannesburg conference was to develop policies and strategies to influence the process of democratic representation of women's interests in the aftermath. The South African example is exceptional because a strong state emerged from the anti-apartheid struggle. More typical in Africa are states weakened by civil war, or states with few resources or, in the case of Somalia, no state at all. What are the chances of transforming gender relations in state and society in these varied circumstances?

Women and women's organisations (including refugees and women living in exile) want representation in peace negotiations. They recognise that the identification of all stakeholders – internal and external, public and behind the scenes – and naming what each stands to gain from peace are necessary if women are to participate effectively in the peace process. They also recognise the political economy of war, the vested interests that profit from and work to sustain chaotic conditions. And they understand that women's expectations in the aftermath differ according to their experiences and engagement in the conflict – for example, some women were combatants or had sustained male combatants; many were refugees and had been internally displaced, while others remained in urban or rural areas. Internal stakeholders include warring parties; political parties and opposition groups; combatants (male and female); organs of civil society (for example, women's groups within refugee camps and internally displaced persons' camps; traditional groups in rural and urban areas, including religious communities); black marketeers; illegal traders in guns, drugs and prostitutes; and exiled intellectuals and groups. External stakeholders include companies and corporations, arms and drugs dealers, international mafia and mercenaries. Regional and international players include peace-keeping forces and peace brokers; key countries are (usually) the US, France, the UK and members of the European Union. The media (local and international) may also be stakeholders.

If civil society is to participate fully at the negotiating table, governments (North and South) must ensure transparency, create user-friendly institutions, and institute checks and balances. All policy must reflect a gender perspective on all issues (not just women's issues), and government must respect and enforce all laws to protect women and children. Participants in the Johannesburg conference recommended that independent women's organisations formulate a women's manifesto at country level and present it to their governments, that they include a demand for new mechanisms to train women leaders, as well as calling for new research and theory on gender and the ideologies of gender.

African Women's Anti-war Coalition

Northern industrial nations and international agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund play a role in creating or supporting political conflict for their own interests. Participants in the Dakar workshop wanted to form a network that could put pressure on these governments and agencies so as to prevent their future interference and compel them to compensate civilian victims. As tax-paying citizens, women must exercise their rights by demanding that their governments support initiatives for peace and make adequate healing mechanisms available to women. Women need to demonstrate against small arms sales to Africa by northern nations, against dictatorial governments, against cross-border incursions and rebel collaboration, against rampant recruitment of soldiers and against the creation of professional mercenaries.

The Dakar participants resolved to create the African Women's Anti-war Coalition so that they could take something concrete and sustainable back to their countries – a strong network of African women opposed to war. The Coalition adopted a declaration to put pressure on states, through solidarity with other national and international agencies, to end present conflicts and to prevent future conflicts; to lobby for support for women in countries in conflict; to assist with training and sensitisation programmes for human rights, healing and education; to popularise women's human rights and the gendered nature of problems that women face during and after conflict; and to receive and disseminate information regionally and internationally.³

Some of the participants in the Johannesburg conference stayed on another day to establish the Coalition on a firm, continent-wide basis. They agreed on a regional structure (West, Central, North, South and East), under the umbrella of a general assembly and board, with a president, vice-president, treasurer, deputy treasurer and regional representatives and alternates. Participants elected an interim steering committee composed of Anu Pillay (South Africa) (coordinator); Codou Bop (Senegal) (coordinator); Lina Zedriga (Uganda); Lona James Lowilla (Sudan); and Sheila Meintjes (South Africa). They mandated the coordinators to develop a constitution and operational procedures for the Coalition.

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- 2 Barry, op. cit., p. vii.
- 3 'Declaration of African Women's Anti-War Coalition, Dakar, Senegal, 13 December 1998', in *ROAPE* (Vol. 26, no. 79, March 1999), pp. 130–1.

Peoples' Global Action: a brief history

Peoples' Global Action against 'Free' Trade and the World Trade Organisation (PGA) is an instrument of coordination, not an organisation. Its main objectives are

- 1) Inspiring the greatest number of persons, movements and organisations to act against corporate domination through non-violent civil disobedience and people-oriented constructive actions.
- 2) Offering an instrument for coordination and mutual support at a global level for those resisting corporate rule and the capitalist development paradigm.
- 3) Giving more international prominence to the struggles against economic liberalisation and global capitalism.

The tenets of the alliance are:

- 1) A clear rejection of trade liberalisation agreements (WTO, EU, NAFTA, etc.) as active promoters of a socially and environmentally destructive globalisation.
- 2) A confrontational attitude, since we do not think that lobbying can have a major impact on such biased and undemocratic organisations, in which transnational capital is the only real policy-maker.
- 3) A call to non-violent civil disobedience and the construction of local alternatives by local people, as answers to the action of governments and corporations.
- 4) An organisational philosophy based on decentralisation and autonomy.

The PGA's political analysis and call for action are reflected in its manifesto, a living document that will be revised at every PGA conference (available at www.agp.org).

PGA has no membership, and it does not and will not have a juridical character. No organisation or person represents PGA, nor does PGA represent any organisation or person. PGA will only facilitate coordination and information flow with the help of conferences and information tools.

The conferences of PGA are convened by a committee agreed by organisations and movements from all continents, representing different sectors of society, plus the local organisers of each conference. This committee determines the programme of the conference, takes decisions about participation in the conference and the use of resources, decides which publications can be printed under the name of PGA, and checks the content of the information tools of PGA. The committee cannot speak in the name of PGA. Each PGA conference will elect the convenors' committee for the next conference.

PGA has no resources. The funds needed for conferences and information tools have to be raised in a decentralised way. All the funds raised for the conference are administered by the committee. The publications are self-financed.

The first PGA conference

PGA's first target was the second ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), 18–20 May 1998. Ministers from around the world were planning to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of GATT, which had become the main instrument of transnational capital for organising and enforcing global economic governance. This event was intended, in the words of its organisers, to 'celebrate the past while preparing the way for the future' of trade liberalisation – i.e., the destruction of rural societies, of dignity in labour, the environment, cultural diversity and self-determination.

Around fifty representatives of peoples' organisations from the South and the North met to prepare the resistance against this event in El Indiano (Spain) in August 1997, just after the second Inter-continental Gathering for Humanity and against Neoliberalism. The meeting aimed to develop common plans against the GATT-WTO commemoration, as well as to develop lasting instruments of communication and coordination in the struggle against such 'free'-trade agreements. The participants included mass-based farmers' movements from India (KRRS), the Philippines (KMP), Indonesia (KAP), Brazil (MST), Peru (CCP) and Bolivia (FCB), indigenous peoples' organisations from Nigeria (MOSOP) and Mexico (CNI and Asamblea de la

Resistencia Civil from Chiapas), trade unions from Nicaragua (CST) and diverse organisations from the North.

The August 1997 meeting decided to launch a network for maintaining communication and coordination after the days of action against the ministerial conference in May 1998. The original idea was to extend the network which had organised the second Intercontinental Gathering, but most participants felt that its decision-making procedures were not sufficiently clear for such a decision to be made in a legitimate way. Hence, it was decided to convene an international conference in Geneva in February 1998 to establish such a network and to discuss plans of action against the ministerial conference of the WTO. The new network was to be called Peoples' Global Action against 'Free' Trade and the WTO, in short, Peoples' Global Action or PGA.

From 23–25 February, more than 300 delegates of people's movements from seventy-one countries and all continents gathered in Geneva for the founding conference of PGA. Teachers hunger-striking against privatisation in Argentina met women organising against quasi-slavery in the *maquila* factories of Mexico, Bangladesh, Salvador and Nicaragua; women's rights activists; farmers struggling against globalisation in India, the Philippines, Brazil, Estonia, Norway, Honduras, France, Spain, Switzerland, Bangladesh, Senegal, Mozambique, Togo, Peru, Bolivia, Columbia and many other countries; Ogoni, Maori, Maya, Aymara, U'wa and other indigenous peoples fighting for their cultural rights and physical survival; students struggling against nuclear power or the repression of striking workers in Ukraine and South Korea; postal workers from Canada resisting privatisation, militants against 'unfree' trade from the United States, environmentalists, the unemployed, fisherfolk, anti-racists, peace mobilisers, animal rights activists . . .

Such a world-wide meeting of women and men from grassroots movements was an extraordinary experience, bringing new vision, hope and determination to us all. Despite the huge material differences, those from struggles in privileged and under-privileged parts of the world could witness that they have more and more in common, setting the stage for a new and stronger sort of solidarity. The conference itself, largely housed in squatted halls and houses, depended entirely on the voluntary work of the Genevan 'alternative' sector, which exemplified this solidarity. The meeting resulted in the first PGA manifesto.

The first world-wide coordination of local actions against 'free' trade took place during the WTO ministerial conference and was a huge success. Many demonstrations, actions and global street parties took place all over the world from 16–20 May, in a total of twenty-nine countries.

During the days of action and for months afterwards, waves of repressive measures were taken against activists associated with the PGA network. The police arrested and mistreated hundreds of protesters in Geneva and other cities where major actions were taking place. In the following months, some key activists were arrested, and their flats and the offices of key organisations were searched by the police. In August 1998 in Geneva, the police arrested all the participants in a seminar organised by people associated with PGA.

Nevertheless, the planning of actions continued: the second PGA conference was to take place before the third ministerial conference of the WTO in Seattle (USA). The PGA convenors endorsed two major projects for the first half of 1999: the Intercontinental Caravan for Solidarity and Resistance in May–June and the Global Day of Action against Financial Centres on 18 June.

The Intercontinental Caravan and G8

The Intercontinental Caravan for Solidarity and Resistance brought around 450 representatives of peoples' movements from the South and the East together with a diverse network of European grassroots groups, for a full programme of actions, meetings and demonstrations. The groups preparing the caravan in Europe ranged from organisations of the unemployed to groups working against genetic engineering, from squatted social centres to feminist organisations. They invited the participants in the caravan to travel to a total of ten countries in a route that culminated in protests against G8 – the heads of state of the most industrialised countries of the world, who met in Cologne in June 1999 for the World Economic Summit.

The largest section of the caravan represented Indian peoples' movements (which had proposed the project in mid-1998), though there were also representatives of the landless farmers' movement in Brazil, the supporters of the Zapatistas from Mexico, the organisation of landless labourers from Bangladesh, the indigenous peoples of Chile, an African American network, a human rights organisation from Nepal, environmental organisations from Ukraine, an anti-nuclear organisation from Pakistan, etc. Among the Indian participants, the majority represented farmers' organisations, but also other social sectors such as the fisherfolk, the Adivasi (indigenous peoples), movements against big dams, etc.

The caravan's actions included demonstrations in front of the headquarters of multinational corporations such as Novartis, Monsanto, Cargill, Nestlé and others; at institutions such as the WTO, NATO, the FAO and the European Central Bank; and at events such as the the European Union summit. The caravan also undertook some direct actions, such as the destruction of two fields of genetically modified

crops and one biotechnology laboratory in collaboration with the French Peasants' Confederation, or the painting of Novartis' building in Barcelona along with a wide range of social and ecological organisations.

In Cologne, the organisations represented in the caravan raised their voices against the plans of the industrial nations to continue pushing for trade and investment treaties designed to benefit transnational capital at the expense of people and the environment. They specifically opposed the 'Millennium Round', an attempt to start a new round of negotiations within the WTO, as proposed by the European Union and endorsed by the US and Japan. They also rejected the very concept of Third World debt, called for a ban on the use of genetically modified organisms in agriculture and denounced militarism and the nuclear industry in both the North and the South. Unfortunately, their protest was suppressed by a disproportionate and aggressive police presence: 15,000 policemen and policewomen from all over the country were brought to Cologne to make sure that any confrontational opposition would be blocked. The media played their usual role of ignoring the mass arrests and police brutality.

June 18, the day when the World Economic Summit started and one day after the caravan reached Cologne, was a global day of action against financial centres, a day on which hundreds of decentralised actions took place all over the planet. Movements ranging from the Chikoko Movement in Nigeria to Pakistani trade unions, from the Argentinian churches to the squatters of London, took to the financial centres of their cities to manifest their rejection of the rule of the G8. Such coordinated resistance across forty-one countries shows how the convergence of resistances is gaining strength and speed.¹

Second PGA conference in Bangalore

The second conference of Peoples' Global Action was held in Bangalore from 23–26 August 1999. This event fulfilled several aims. It

1) launched a discussion process among world-wide peoples' movements on the role that an international coordination and communication network should play. The conference agreed that there be both a regionally decentralised network of communications, with regional information 'hubs' located with the convenors, together with a central clearing house for information – the PGA website – which would disseminate the global PGA bulletin. (For the current regional convenors, see the webpage);²

2) planned mobilisations against the third WTO ministerial conference (see below), as well as generating new plans for action; and

3) began to revise the PGA manifesto by adding passages. In particular, the conference added extra tenets: 'We reject all forms and systems of domination and discrimination including, but not limited to, patriarchy, racism and religious fundamentalism of all creeds. We embrace the full dignity of all human beings.' Extra text clarified that capitalism is the enemy:

PGA has provided a unique forum to share common experiences about how the new and the old-face capitalism is threatening social, cultural and economic security. It has also given us hope, that if we are united, the collective struggle for dignity and justice cannot be subverted, manipulated or crushed . . .

As the conference was hosted by the Karnataka State Farmers' Association (KRRS), a major social movement in South Asia, it enabled PGA delegates to get acquainted with the work of various grassroots movements in Bangalore, Karnataka and north Kerala. Before and after the conference the KRRS also organised exposure trips to rural areas where important struggles were taking place.

The third WTO ministerial conference was planned to take place between 29 November and 3 December 1999 in Seattle, as the 'Millennium Round'. In particular, northern governments and TNCs intended to

a) launch a new round of negotiations to further 'liberalise' trade and investment, by incorporating into the WTO regime an agreement similar to the defeated Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) originally negotiated in the OECD;

b) expand the WTO Agreement on Agriculture, which is a major reason for the misery of small farmers in all continents, the elimination of food security policies, the increasing concentration of productive resources in the hands of agribusiness, and the introduction of genetic engineering in fields and kitchens all over the world;

c) expand the TRIPs agreement on intellectual property, which forces all WTO member countries to give private property rights over life forms (in the form of patents).

For the third WTO summit in Seattle, another Global Day of Action call went out, sent also in the name of the IWW and the Direct Action Network (DAN) on the west coast of the US. Events, large or small, were organised in some seventy-four cities and other locations around the world, with eighteen in India (including New Delhi, Bangalore and the Narmada valley), fourteen in Canada, nine in Germany, at least eight in the United States, seven in Great Britain (including London) and as many in Italy, plus Geneva (5,000 people), Buenos

Aires, Mexico City, Prague, Brisbane, Amsterdam. There were demonstrations in Pakistan (8,000 people), Sri Lanka, Turkey, Israel, Ireland, Iceland, etc. (There were also demonstrations in Korea, the Philippines and Greece, apparently without links to the call to action. In France, people responded to a separate call of the ATTAC movement, which reported 75,000 participants in eighty cities.)

But of course, the major surprise was in Seattle itself, where the Direct Action Network actually stopped the WTO summit from opening on November 30. The DAN is a network of committees formed at the beginning of the summer in eight west coast cities, ranging from Vancouver, Canada, to Los Angeles. Citing the four PGA tenets (see above) and inspired by the Indian farmers' 'cremation' of GMO crops, the uprising in Chiapas and the takeover of London's financial district by Reclaim the Streets during the June 18 Global Day of Action, this network not only co-sponsored the call to global action on 30 November, but organised for Seattle in a serious, creative and efficient manner. A twenty-page action pack detailed exactly how DAN planned to form clusters of affinity groups technically and politically prepared to block all the approaches to the Seattle convention centre by creative, non-violent actions; how the resistance was to be pursued in jail in the case of mass arrests; how to deal with the media; first aid, etc. They dared a prophecy:

Envision . . . Thousands of people theatrically processing through Seattle with giant images and puppets graphically showing the economic and ecological devastation left in the wake of global capital. Mass non-violent direct actions and blockades shutting down roads and arteries leading to the ministerial [conference] of the WTO . . . breaking down corporate globalisation and showing glimpses of the world as it could – be global liberation . . . life, creativity and resistance hurled in the face of thousands of deadening bureaucrats, business people and politicians at the WTO ministerial . . . The cacophony against capital will be deafening when nine days of large scale street theater preparations culminate in the largest festival of resistance the world has ever seen.

I myself could only believe it as I saw it happen, sections of the two converging marches (one led by a group of progressive steel-workers, the other by the PGA North American Caravan) breaking off to block the thirteen approaches to the convention centre, the people so determined that the police had soon exhausted their stock of gas, without succeeding in breaking the siege. By the time the much larger march of the unions and NGOs approached, the day was won, and a large proportion of the marchers abandoned the official (legal) trajectory to fraternise with the DAN in a huge cross-city festival that ended only at nightfall in a last shower of gas and concussion grenades.

During the four succeeding days, the spirit of the demonstrations was as beautiful.

After the brutal repression and hundreds of arrests of Wednesday, 1 December, we literally danced back into the 'No demonstration zone' ('No Constitution zone') the next day, with passing motorists, bus drivers and workers on the construction sites cheering us on. Throughout the city, in the jail, around the jail (besieged by the protestors for three days and nights) the air was alive with the awareness that this was a rare moment, perhaps the birth of a new popular movement in the US.

OLIVIER DE MARCELLUS

Olivier de Marcellus has been active in extra-parliamentary politics in Geneva since 1968, having been particularly involved in anti-nuclear, urban and solidarity issues. The dynamic of the Zapatista Encounters and a long-standing interest in economics led to his current engagement in PGA.

References

- 1 See Mark Lynas, 'The real story of June 18', <http://www.oneworld.org/news/reports99/j18.html>
- 2 Regional Convenors designated at the 2nd PGA conference:
 - North America – Pennsylvania Consumer Action Network, USA (interim) <MWMorrill@aol.com>
 - Latin America – Proceso de Comunidades Negras, Colombia (interim) <libia@colnet.com.co>, <pcncongahotmail.com>
 - W. Europe – Ya Basta!, Italy <patham@iol.it>
 - Asia Pacific – Foundation for Independent Aotearoa, Aotearoa (New Zealand), (interim) <asykes@clear.net.nz>, <waiariki@yahoo.com>
 - S. Asia – Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform, Sri Lanka, <monlar@sltnet.lk>