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DR KUMAR RUPESINGHE

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The first time I met Kumar was when we were both appointed by the Director-General of UNESCO to serve on a special advisory body. It was a group of experts designed to elucidate the subject of the rights of peoples in international law. This would have been about twelve years ago. The meeting was in Budapest, Hungary.

Kumar arrived late at the meeting. That was definitely not a good start - considering that I managed to get there on time from the greatest distance. I must confess that my first impression was that he was a little too self-confident and insufficiently deferential to us, the early birds. In this, I was no doubt portraying the rigidities of my personality and of my judicial profession.

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But then he began to speak in his golden voice. And what struck me was the consistent originality of his insights. He would challenge just about everything we were saying. He would try to get us back to basics. He would not just embrace the consensus of the group. Irritatingly enough, he wanted us to look at fundamental ethical and moral questions. In short, he was intensely irritating; and aggravatingly right.

I knew immediately that I was in the presence of a very original intellect and a courageous human being. He was somebody willing to speak up for what he believed in. He was not particularly concerned to win votes. In an age of politics by opinion polls and consensus by media spin, Kumar Rupesinghe is someone who just speaks his mind. And his mind is a well-fashioned instrument shaped by years of commitment to human rights, conflict resolution and the protection of minorities. It is not just an intellectual commitment. It is a deep emotional one. Such a combination of mind and heart is powerful indeed. Overcoming my initial impression, I became a devotee of Kumar, the guru. I have remained so ever since.

We have worked together at another conference on peoples' rights. We have been associated through the International Council of International Alert. Like me, he is something of a neurotic correspondent. Any letter I would send him would be promptly answered. There were times when I had to hose him down - or at least to try to do so - on particular

issues. But generally he carried me along with his broad vision, activist attitude and generous spirit. I imagine that many will, as I did, initially find the first encounter with Kumar Rupesinghe an unsettling and disconcerting moment in life. But if you stay with him, it is an enriching experience. I am grateful for his friendship.

A peaceful world in the coming century must be built on respect for the rule of law, for fundamental human rights and for the independence of judges and lawyers. It must be build on much else besides: but these are the natural focus of concern of a judge and lawyer. The rule of law means more than simply obeying the law, whatever it may say. We learned that much from the autocracies of the dying century. There was no state more controlled by law than Hitler's Germany. It is a rule of *just* laws that we must seek to build. That requires accountable legislators and officials, governments respectful of the rights of minorities and judges and lawyers with independence and courage to uphold fundamental human rights.

Human rights mean more than the civil and political rights that tend to capture the attention of Western societies, although these are undoubtedly included. My work for the United Nations in Cambodia taught me that human rights extend to the right to health care; to education for one's children; for an environment free from landmines; for clean drinking water and a community alert to the dangers of HIV/AIDS.

In addition to fundamental human rights, a peaceful world will respect the rights of peoples. There is no issue which is more likely to cause conflict and violence in the coming century than the unrequited demand of peoples for self-determination which is guaranteed to them by international law. Reconciling international peace and security and the achievement of the people's right to self-determination is one of the great challenges for the international community. It is a difficult problem. But it will not go away by submitting to the dictates of the nation states which would generally favour taking the issue off the agenda. Institutions must be built and principles established whereby the people's right to self-determination can be achieved. It does not necessarily mean the dismemberment of states or the creation of new ones. Sometimes the right of peoples to self-determination can be achieved within existing states, by appropriate recognition of the rights of minorities. This is an issue that deserves the attention of the finest thinkers of the age. Anyone in doubt should reflect upon the lessons of the Jewish Holocaust, of Bosnia and Rwanda, the perils of Tibet and the many other places where the right to self-determination is denied.

Dr Kumar Rupesinghe, through International Alert and elsewhere, has already made notable contributions to building a more peaceful world in the 21st century. I am convinced that his most creative years lie ahead.