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# **HUMAN SECURITY:**

## **SAFETY FOR PEOPLE IN A CHANGING WORLD**

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## FOREWORD

For more than two years now I have been advocating an international political agenda that would include the idea of human security. The changing nature of violent conflict and intensifying globalization have increasingly put people at the centre of world affairs. As a result, the safety of the individual – that is, human security – has become both a new measure of global security and a new impetus for global action.

As is often the case in public policy, practice has led theory. Efforts to promote greater human security including the Ottawa Convention on Anti-personnel Landmines and the Rome Treaty creating an International Criminal Court have attracted overwhelming international support. As momentum gathers around the idea of human security, greater clarity on the meaning of the term is needed.

This concept paper has been prepared to provide a definition of human security, to set out the rationale for a human security approach, and to clarify its relationship to national security and to human development. Broader acceptance of the concept of human security is fundamentally important.



Lloyd Axworthy  
Minister of Foreign Affairs  
Ottawa, Canada  
April 29, 1999



## THE NEED FOR A NEW APPROACH TO SECURITY

Since the end of the Cold War, security for the majority of states has increased, while security for many of the world's people has declined.

The end of the superpower confrontation has meant greater security for states touched by that rivalry. Yet during this decade we have seen new civil conflicts, large-scale atrocities, and even genocide. Globalization has brought many benefits, but it has also meant a rise in violent crime, drug trade, terrorism, disease and environmental deterioration. It clearly does not follow that when states are secure, people are secure.

Security between states remains a necessary condition for the security of people. The principal objective of national security is the protection of territorial integrity and political sovereignty from external aggression. While declining in frequency, the threat of inter-state war has not vanished, and the potential consequences of such a war should not be underestimated. Technological advances and proliferation of weaponry mean that future wars between states will exact a horrific toll on civilians. At the same time, national security is insufficient to guarantee people's security.

A growing number of armed conflicts are being fought within, rather than between, states. The warring factions in these civil wars are often irregular forces with loose chains of command, frequently divided along ethnic or religious lines. Small arms are the weapon of choice and non-combatants account for eight out of ten casualties. Once considered merely "collateral damage," civilians are being thrust into the epicentre of contemporary war.

Greater exposure to violence is not limited to people in situations of armed conflict. It is also directly related to the erosion of state control. This decline is most evident in failed states, where governments are simply incapable of providing even basic security for people threatened by warlords and bandits. Challenges to state control can also be seen in the expansion of organized crime, drug trafficking, and the growth of private security forces.

Security for people is also affected by a broadening range of transnational threats. In an increasingly interdependent world we routinely experience mutual, if unequal vulnerability. Opening markets, increased world trade, and a revolution in communications are highly beneficial, but they have also made borders more porous to a wide range of threats. A growing number of hazards to people's health – from long range transmission of pollutants to infectious diseases – are global phenomena in both their origins and their effects. Economic shocks in one part of the world can lead rapidly to crises in another, with devastating implications for the security of the most vulnerable.

These broad trends are clearly not new to the 1990s; each has been intensifying over recent decades. During 40 years of superpower rivalry, however, nuclear confrontation and ideological competition dominated the security agenda. As a result, these other challenges have only been widely acknowledged in more recent years. Outside the confines of the Cold War, the opportunity exists to develop a comprehensive and systematic approach to enhancing the security of people.



## BACKGROUND TO THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN SECURITY

While the term “human security” may be of recent origin, the ideas that underpin the concept are far from new. For more than a century – at least since the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross in the 1860s – a doctrine based on the security of people has been gathering momentum. Core elements of this doctrine were formalized in the 1940s in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Geneva Conventions.

The specific phrase “human security” is most commonly associated with the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report, an attempt to capture the post-Cold War peace dividend and redirect those resources towards the development agenda. The definition advanced in the report was extremely ambitious. Human security was defined as the summation of seven distinct dimensions of security: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political. By focusing on people and highlighting non-traditional threats, the UNDP made an important contribution to post-Cold War thinking about security.

The very breadth of the UNDP approach, however, made it unwieldy as a policy instrument. Equally important, in emphasizing the threats associated with underdevelopment, the Report largely ignored the continuing human insecurity resulting from violent conflict. Yet by the UNDP’s own criteria, human insecurity is greatest during war. Of the 25 countries at the bottom of the 1998 Human Development Index, more than half are suffering the direct or indirect effects of violent conflict. The UNDP definition of human security was proposed as a key concept during the preparatory stages of the 1995 Copenhagen Summit on Social Development. But it was rejected during the Summit and has not been widely used thereafter.

Over the past two years the concept of human security has increasingly centred on the human costs of violent conflict. Here, practice has led theory. Two initiatives in particular, the campaign to ban landmines and the effort to create an International Criminal Court, have demonstrated the potential of a people-centred approach to security. Anti-personnel landmines are a clear example of a threat to the security of people. While contributing only marginally to the security of states, mines have a devastating impact on ordinary people attempting to rebuild their lives in war-torn societies. The International Criminal Court establishes a mechanism to hold individuals accountable for war crimes and crimes against humanity, and holds the promise of preventing the future abuse of people by governments and other parties to conflicts. Both measures are practical, powerful applications of the concept of human security.



## DEFINING HUMAN SECURITY – A SHIFT IN THE ANGLE OF VISION

In essence, human security means safety for people from both violent and non-violent threats. It is a condition or state of being characterized by freedom from pervasive threats to people's rights, their safety, or even their lives. From a foreign policy perspective, human security is perhaps best understood as a shift in perspective or orientation. It is an alternative way of seeing the world, taking people as its point of reference, rather than focusing exclusively on the security of territory or governments. Like other security concepts - national security, economic security, food security - it is about protection. Human security entails taking preventive measures to reduce vulnerability and minimize risk, and taking remedial action where prevention fails.

The range of potential threats to human security should not be narrowly conceived. While the safety of people is obviously at grave risk in situations of armed conflict, a human security approach is not simply synonymous with humanitarian action. It highlights the need to address the root causes of insecurity and to help ensure people's future safety. There are also human security dimensions to a broad range of challenges, such as gross violations of human rights, environmental degradation, terrorism, transnational organized crime, gender-based violence, infectious diseases and natural disasters. The widespread social unrest and violence that often accompanies economic crises demonstrates that there are clear economic underpinnings to human security. The litmus test for determining if it is useful to frame an issue in human security terms is the degree to which the safety of people is at risk.

# IV

## A NECESSARY COMPLEMENT TO NATIONAL SECURITY

Human security does not supplant national security. A human security perspective asserts that the security of the state is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a means of ensuring security for its people. In this context, state security and human security are mutually supportive. Building an effective, democratic state that values its own people and protects minorities is a central strategy for promoting human security. At the same time, improving the human security of its people strengthens the legitimacy, stability, and security of a state. When states are externally aggressive, internally repressive, or too weak to govern effectively, they threaten the security of people. Where human security exists as a fact rather than an aspiration, these conditions can be attributed in large measure to the effective governance of states.

From a human security perspective, concern for the safety of people extends beyond borders. Although broadening the focus of security policy beyond citizens may at first appear to be a radical shift, it is a logical extension of current approaches to international peace and security. The Charter of the United Nations embodies the view that security cannot be achieved by a single state in isolation. The phrase "international peace and security" implies that the security of one state depends on the security of other states. A human security perspective builds on this logic by noting that the security of people in one part of the world depends on the security of people elsewhere. A secure and stable world order is built both from the top down, and from the bottom up. The security of states, and the maintenance of international peace and security, are ultimately constructed on the foundation of people who are secure.



## **AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

The two concepts of human security and human development are mutually reinforcing, though distinct. The UNDP report itself, while proposing a very broad definition of human security, was clear that the two concepts were not synonymous. Together, human security and human development address the twin objectives of freedom from fear and freedom from want.

People's freedom to act can be constrained by both fears; and for the poorest and most vulnerable members of society, poverty and insecurity are linked in a vicious circle. Breaking that cycle requires measures to promote human development, through access to reliable employment, education, and social services. But it also requires measures to promote human security by offering protection from crime and political violence, respect for human rights including political rights, and equitable access to justice. The absence of such guarantees of human security constitutes a powerful barrier to human development. Regardless of levels of income, if people lack confidence in society's ability to protect them, they will have little incentive to invest in the future. A development optic highlights this positive dimension of the concept — namely the opportunity that human security provides to liberate the potential for growth.

Human security provides an enabling environment for human development. Where violence or the threat of violence makes meaningful progress on the developmental agenda impractical, enhancing safety for people is a prerequisite. Promoting human development can also be an important strategy for furthering human security. By addressing inequalities which are often root causes of violent conflict, by strengthening governance structures, and by providing humanitarian assistance, development assistance complements political, legal, and military initiatives in enhancing human security.



## FOREIGN POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Human security provides a template to assess policy and practice for their effects on the safety of people. From a foreign policy perspective, there are a number of key consequences.

First, when conditions warrant, vigorous action in defence of human security objectives will be necessary. Ensuring human security can involve the use of coercive measures, including sanctions and military force, as in Bosnia and Kosovo.

At the same time, the human costs of strategies for promoting state and international security must be explicitly assessed. This line of argument dates back to the 19th century movement to ban the use of inhumane weapons but, as we have seen in the recent campaign to ban anti-personnel landmines, it continues to have contemporary relevance. Other security policies, such as comprehensive economic sanctions, should take into account the impact on innocent people.

Third, security policies must be integrated much more closely with strategies for promoting human rights, democracy, and development. Human rights, humanitarian and refugee law provide the normative framework on which a human security approach is based. Development strategies offer broadly based means of addressing many long-term human security challenges. One of the dividends of adopting a human security approach is that it further elaborates a people-centred foreign policy.

Fourth, due to the complexity of contemporary challenges to the security of people, effective interventions involve a diverse range of actors including states, multilateral organizations, and civil society groups. As the challenges to the safety of people are transnational, effective responses can only be achieved through multilateral cooperation. This is evident in the array of new international instruments developed in the last decade to address

transnational organized crime, drug trafficking, terrorism, and environmental degradation. These threats link the interest of citizens in countries which enjoy a high level of human security with the interests of people in much poorer nations, who face a wider range of threats to their safety.

Fifth, effective responses will depend on greater operational coordination. For example, successful peace-support operations are multi-dimensional, and depend on the close coordination of political negotiators, peacekeepers, human rights monitors, and humanitarian aid personnel among others. Furthermore, development agencies are now engaged in promoting security sector reform, while security organizations have helped channel development assistance in post-conflict countries. Managing these overlapping mandates and objectives is one of the principal challenges for a human security agenda.

Sixth, civil society organizations are seeking greater opportunity and greater responsibility in promoting human security. In many cases, non-governmental organizations have proven to be extremely effective partners in advocating the security of people. They are also important providers of assistance and protection to those in need of greater security. At the same time, the business sector, potentially a key actor in enhancing human security, could be more effectively engaged.

# VII

## TOWARDS AN AGENDA FOR HUMAN SECURITY

Human security offers a new angle of vision and a broad template for evaluating policies. It also yields a concrete set of foreign policy initiatives. Focusing systematically on the safety of people highlights the need for more targeted attention to key issues that are not yet adequately addressed by the international community. Current examples of such gaps include the unchecked proliferation of small arms and the inadequate protection of children in circumstances of armed conflict.

Human security is enhanced by reducing people's vulnerability and by preventing the conditions which make them vulnerable in the first place. Assisting people in highly insecure situations, particularly in the midst of violent conflict, is a central objective of the human security agenda. Refugees have long been the focus of international attention. The same focus on vulnerability highlights the immediate needs of the internally displaced, and demobilized combatants. At the same time, a human security agenda must go beyond humanitarian action, by addressing the sources of people's insecurity. Building human security, therefore, requires both short term humanitarian action and longer term strategies for building peace and promoting sustainable development.

Two fundamental strategies for enhancing human security are strengthening legal norms and building the capacity to enforce them. New standards are needed in areas such as restricting the illegal trafficking in small arms, banning the use and recruitment of children as soldiers, prohibiting exploitative child labour, providing greater protection for the internally displaced, and ensuring the applicability of legal standards to non-state actors and to violence below the threshold of armed conflict.

There is little point in defining new norms and rights, however, if societies have no capacity to enforce existing norms or to protect already recognized rights. For this reason, improving democratic governance within states is a central strategy for advancing human security. So is strengthening the capacity of international organizations, in particular the United Nations, to deliver on their agreed mandates. Yet the range of protection tasks assigned to UN mandated operations is increasing, at the same time as the UN's capacity to organize and fund such operations is dwindling.

Building institutional capacity without strengthening respect for norms would undermine a human-centred standard of security. Strengthening norms without building the capacity to protect them only invites disillusionment with the possibility of constraining power by the rule of law. Both are essential strategies if we are to move towards a more humane world.

# NOTES