



*Former Assembly of First Nations National Chief Ovide Mercredi calls for the international community to pursue the eradication of global terrorism through a UN-sanctioned peace conference. Mercredi spoke on the issue of global terrorism at McMaster's University's Health Sciences Building Thursday night as part of the university's 2001 Indigenous Studies Lecture Series.*

# Mercredi decries armed response to terrorism

*Former National Chief calls for international peace conference to address issues of global terrorism and poverty*

By Paul Baswick

HAMILTON — Ovide Mercredi has called on world leaders to unite for a international peace conference as a non-violent alternative to eradicating global terrorism.

The former Assembly of First Nations National Chief issued the call Thursday night at McMaster University's Health Sciences Building, where he spoke on the impacts of the Sept. 11 terrorists attacks as part of the school's 2001 Indigenous Studies Lecture Series.

The conference, he said, should be convened within the framework of the United Nations, the organization Mercredi said stands the best chance of bringing hostile nations together to the same table.

"We need the United

Nations to call a special assembly for peace...not a conference of the security council for war. That's not what we need them for," said Mercredi.

He added that such a conference must deal not only with the problem of terrorism itself, but also with the socioeconomic conditions under which violence continues to flourish.

The peace conference was one of several initiatives advocated by Mercredi Thursday which underscore the belief that violence cannot be stopped with further violence.

Among these ideas was a challenge to the Canadian government to shift its involvement in the current US-led action in Afghanistan from a military role to a humanitarian one.

"Tell the Canadian people, the government, to redirect their forces to become humanitarian as opposed to being part of the war effort, so that they can put up tents along the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan and feed people, give them medical attention that they need, make sure the food is there and the supplies are there for the winter."

He said by committing its armed forces to military action in the conflict abroad, the Canadian government has missed an opportunity to set a positive example for other nations.

"Did the Canadian government have to send its army over in full partnership with the American

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# Former AFN Chief calls for peace conference

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government? No, they didn't have to. Instead of sending the weapons and soldiers to support the American initiative, they could have sent the same people, the same equipment, to places where the refugees are now to provide humanitarian help. We could have been the nurses and the cooks, instead of being part of the force for violence."

Mercredi also called on religious leaders across Canada to join publicly in decrying both the recent terrorist acts and the current military action in Afghanistan.

"I'm advocating...that the spiritual people of all faiths convene their own special gathering in this country. If they believe in the tenants of their faith, they should come together...Those leaders can influence the peace making process."

He criticized the nation's spiritual leaders for failing to more strongly voice condemnation of military action in the Middle East.

"Where are the spiritual leaders in the country? Where are they? Why are they so silent? What does their spirituality mean if they are silent to all these acts of violence around the world?"

The absence of a unified voice against armed retaliation, said Mercredi, has left Canadians feeling powerless in today's political climate.

"What do I do as one person? What can I do besides watch television? That is what most people are thinking. There's a feeling of powerlessness. We have no way of expressing our political will collectively, because we are not united."

What Canadians can do as individuals, Mercredi urged the audience of over 500, is to ignore the rhetoric of war which he said has dominated the airwaves since Sept. 11.

"The message is always there that what the Americans are doing is moral, legal and right. The message that we are getting consistently is the same, that the Taliban regime is corrupt and evil," he said.

"I recommend that you stop hate, that you not listen to those messages that try

to teach you to hate more. Put deaf ears to that noise about the 'evil one,' about the 'evil Americans.'"

He insisted that while a discussion of a peaceful solution to the problem of terrorism is highly unpopular in North America today, it is vital for Canadians to continue to pursue that discourse.

"It's clear people do not want terrorism, but they also do not want war — but to speak out today in Canada and the United States is not easy. It is not easy to defend peace. But I say to you it's even less easy to defend violence."

"An act of kindness for your oppressor is more powerful than an act of violence. That is a lesson that we have learned as indigenous people. We can go on hating, and we have every reason to that, but we destroy ourselves if we do that. We destroy what we believe as a people what humanity should be."

He also cited indigenous history in cautioning all Canadians against holding any race or faith accountable for the recent terrorist attacks.

"I remember the history of what happened to indigenous people in North America. I remember the history too well to understand how racism feeds into violence."

He stressed pursuing a peaceful solution to global terrorism, and understanding the root causes of terrorism in order to eradicate it, does not diminish the tragedy of Sept. 11.

"I am not blind to what happened in New York. What happened there was beyond anyone's sense of morality, but I also am not blind to what's happening, what I see in the other country called Afghanistan, the subject of all these attacks," he said.

What will win the fight against terrorism, added Mercredi, is an effort by all sides involved in the current conflict to understand each other and to find commonality.

"We have to appeal to everybody's sense of justice. Even the oppressor, whoever the oppressor is, has a sense of justice. We have to look into that."