At least 171 people were reportedly killed in an airstrike in central Myanmar on 11 April during the water festival. Thirty-eight children were among the casualties. Looking beyond the Asia-Pacific region, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is still ongoing. More than one or two years without peace and fundamental rights and freedoms in these countries is already far too long.

Ryuichi Sakamoto died in March this year. Not only was he known as the Academy Award-winning composer of the soundtrack for The Last Emperor, but he also spoke out on global issues, promoting a “non-war” stance instead of an “anti-war” one. He composed a piece for a young Ukrainian violinist, Illia Bondarenko, and conveyed the following message in April 2022:

"War. I don’t want this to happen. Wars hurt and kill young soldiers and innocent people regardless of whether they are from your own country or an enemy country. Why do wars not disappear? Why are there people who want to start wars? Wars are profitable. Is there anyone who can ethically endure them? Bombs are being dropped on children all over the world. Why can’t we stop them?"

Can we really not end war?

During World War I, trade union leaders were keenly aware that the competition to erode labour standards in order to obtain comparative advantages in trade had heightened the tensions between nations and led to the war. They argued for international cooperation to protect workers’ rights, resulting in the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The treaty established two international organisations: the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The League of Nations, due to its political and institutional flaws, failed to achieve its original objectives and ended its role with the outbreak of World War II. On the other hand, the ILO has consistently worked to protect the rights and livelihoods of workers and overcome political and economic crises such as the Great Depression, World War II and the Cold War.

There are good reasons why ILO’s role remains relevant for more than 100 years. One of them is that the ILO has taken indirect approaches to achieving global peace by reducing unemployment, poverty and inequality, which can be the underlying causes of war, through the development of labour standards.

Today, the importance of the rule of law is emphasised in line with the new concept of peacebuilding, and assistance for legal development has become one of the major activities of international organisations. But the ILO has been working on legal issues, although in the limited field of labour, for more than 100 years.
One of the ILO’s international labour standards is Convention No. 102. This is an international law that sets minimum standards for social security systems such as medical care, unemployment and family benefits and pensions. It has been ratified by 64 countries, although only three of these are in the Asia-Pacific region. Imagine if all ILO member states ratified Convention No. 102 and fully realised the minimum necessary levels of social security benefits.

If leaders and their governments prioritise people's rights and dignity, they would likely allocate greater allocation for social protection programmes and other social services. Unfortunately, many countries in the region prioritise defence and increased their military spending even during the pandemic, crowding out the fiscal space that could have been utilised for social protection and other recovery measures.

Upholding people’s rights and dignity is crucial in building a more prosperous and just society. Individuals with more freedom in their daily lives would be able to think about their future and that of the next generation. They would likely become more interested in government policies and speaking out more actively.

Effective leaders would genuinely listen to the voices of people belonging to various groups and include them in democratic public policymaking processes, rather than attacking specific elements of society with hateful words to secure the support of their followers. They would cooperate with each other towards improving the welfare of the people, instead of subduing them with violence.

By promoting rights, dignity and democratic principles, a just and inclusive society free from war and conflicts.

Trade unions can play a significant role in fostering peace and making a just and inclusive future a reality. Throughout their history, trade unions have struggled to make difference to the current system and rules to ensure not only dignity in the workplace and social justice for all, but also global peace. By building workers’ power, they have overcome challenges and steadily strived to make tomorrow better than today.

The International Trade Union Confederation-Asia Pacific will hold its fifth regional conference in November this year in Bangkok. This will be an opportunity to discuss how to build workers’ strength and reinforce workers’ bargaining power in the negotiation for a new social contract. This will be an opportunity to reinvigorate the trade union movement in the region towards fully realising workers’ rights and achieving the future of work we want. A new social contract is the way forward for a just and inclusive future of work in the Asia-Pacific region.

Sakamoto’s music took Illia Bondarenko to a school that was destroyed by a direct hit from a Russian missile. He said, “This music of hope is about children. It is their dreams, their laughter that echo through all the years of study at this school, but were shattered at one stroke.” Please take a few minutes to listen to him to play Sakamoto’s song and think about how we can promote peace.

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