

Human rights under siege worldwide

Terrorism is a serious threat to our societies and way of life. We must give top priority to combating it, but if we ignore or undermine the protection of human rights in the process we shall endanger the principles of humanity for which we are purportedly fighting.

To gain Russian support over Iraq and Iran, the Americans and the British have downplayed Russian repression in Chechnya. Because they recognise the growing power of the Chinese economy, they generally refrain from criticising the Chinese.

In Iran, the focus is on the country's nuclear programme rather than on the students and other dissidents who are persecuted by religious zealots. Member governments of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are reluctant to take tough measures against the military despots in Myanmar. British criticism of Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe is not backed up by international action.

In most Western democracies, there have been failures in upholding human rights. In the United States, Attorney General John Ashcroft appears to be a neoconservative authoritarian who will go to the limits allowed by the US Constitution as interpreted by the Supreme Court. The legal rights of citizens seem threatened by some of the measures that he has introduced. Internees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, have been denied access to lawyers and fair trials. Their conditions of imprisonment appear to be highly restrictive. The revelation that among the internees there are some adolescents has surprised and appalled many observers. In Iraq it seems clear that US forces have not done enough to restore law and order and the military often seem to have been trigger-happy.

In Britain, Home Secretary David Blunkett has been criticised for his attempt to influence the judges and to use Draconian measures against refugees. British prisons are overcrowded and rehabilitation efforts are inadequate.

In the rest of Europe, the police have a reputation for being high-handed and redress against the police is difficult to obtain. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has persuaded Parliament that he should be exempt from trial on serious charges while in office. French President Jacques Chirac managed to brush aside complaints about improper behaviour while he was mayor of Paris.

The maintenance of the death penalty in the US and in Japan is a real cause for concern among human rights campaigners. The death penalty has been abolished in European Union countries. There is no evidence that it deters murderers, and there are real dangers that on occasion people later proved to have been innocent have been executed.

The establishment of the International Criminal Court should help to ensure that future despotic leaders are more circumspect in their behaviour, but the US refusal to support the court and their efforts to ensure that their nationals will not be subject to prosecution in the court has undermined the value and prestige of the court.

Amnesty International is not popular with authoritarian politicians who may have guilty consciences. But it and other organisations supporting the victims of torture and the reform of prison conditions have an important role in reminding all of us that human rights are being constantly impinged even in purportedly democratic countries. Their reports deserve to be taken seriously and given due publicity. We must also ensure that our politicians are called to account and forced to take remedial measures where necessary and appropriate.

Japanese politicians should take early steps to reform the Japanese prison system, which is a shameful blot on Japan's reputation as an upholder of human rights. Japanese prisons should be open to independent inspection.

Hugh Cortazzi, The Japan Times, July 9, 2003