

New  
8/12

# All humans are born free

Human rights.  
113

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**T**he UN High Commissioner on Human Rights Mary Robinson, also President of the Republic of Ireland, while declaring 1998 Human Rights Year, beginning December 10, vowed to pursue "All Human Rights for All". This is also the theme of the golden jubilee commemoration. Ms Robinson has laid a tall agenda for the commemorative year. She considers the year will provide "an opportunity for an honest and open debate towards a better understanding about human rights, which are essential to stability, peace and stability."

Almost half a century ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations. The document laid down common standards of the rights of individuals. It was the human desire for peace that led to its adoption; a declaration almost similar to the US constitution. The UN has been through its heyday and seen the days of subservience because of its structure and organisation in a highly polarised world. However, despite its limitations it has managed to play an important role in the settlement of most of the international disputes.

Over the period of 50 years people have not only questioned the efficacy of the outfit but also its role. Ever since its inception there has been an argument for the organisation to come out boldly to help people around the world. In the sixties and seventies with new states emerging on the globe, its role transformed radically from that of a post-war European outfit to an all-encompassing global organisation. However, there has been a long-felt need to reform the world organisation.

Kofi Annan's reform proposals, though welcome, unfortunately remain restricted to administration. They do not address the issue of the UN's role in a world much different from when it was formed. For the UN to play an effective role in the world today, it has to shun its cold war prejudices. This, luckily, is happening despite the intransigence of those who control it.

places where every man, woman and child seeks equal rights and justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere else. Without concerned citizens action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the large world."

However, in August-September 1944 when Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin met and drew up the charter of the UN, it was a balance between realism and idealism. The UN declaration is based on the precept of "inherent dignity of all the members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world". This is integrally linked with the recognition of fundamental rights which every human being deserves even if he doesn't aspire: the right to life, liberty and security; the right to adequate standard of living; the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution; the right to own property not in violation to others' right to existence; the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the right to education; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; the right to not be tortured and degraded.

Since 1948, the Universal Declaration has been translated into more than 200 languages and remains one of the best known most-cited document of human rights. Unfortunately, majority of those affected cannot read it. They do not know what their

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The recent reform proposals made by Secretary-General Annan do not address the larger issues like efficacy of the outfit in a world very different from what it was when it was created. Interestingly, not much is required except for rejuvenating the messianic mission of the world body at the time of its creation. This was unfortunately lost immediately after its inception, in the dark clouds of the cold war.

One of the *raison d'être* of the modern state is to protect human rights. Ironically, no state however civilised has ever willingly granted fundamental human rights to its citizens. People have struggled for what should be theirs. The civil rights movement in the US is one important example of people's struggle and their victory.

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THIS YEAR

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rights are. The world today is marred by vast differences between the rich and poor countries and the widening gulf between the people.

In complete contrast to the interdependence dream and its envisioned bright prospects, the chasm between the rich and the poor countries seems to be greater than ever. Those who had some hope in development seem to be frustrated.

There are no forces more harsh and unscrupulous than the market forces. In its regime only those with money can survive, as the principle is have it if you can afford it, education, health or whatever. If you cannot afford it, forget it. Only those who can afford life have the right to live, seems to be the message.

The goal in the jubilee year should be to pursue the observance of human rights as prescribed in the 1948 UN Declaration on Human Rights and the subsequent UN Human Rights conventions. No concession should be made in achieving this aim. We still do not know if all the hopes instilled by the UN Charter will ever be fulfilled. But one thing we do know: we have to try, for the sake of humanity.