

Dawn  
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# The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

## A Magna Carta for all peoples

Human rights.

NEW YORK: Some 50 years have elapsed since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations on December 10, 1948. The declaration was one of the first major achievements of the United Nations, and after 50 years remains a powerful instrument which continues to exert an enormous effect on people's lives all over the world.

This was the first time in history that a document considered to have universal value was adopted by an international organization. It was also the first time that human rights and fundamental freedoms were set forth in such detail. There was broad-based international support for the declaration when it was adopted. It represented "a world milestone in the long struggle for human rights", in the words of a UN General Assembly representative from France.

The adoption of the Universal Declaration stems in large part from the strong desire for peace in the aftermath of Second World War. Although the 58 member states which formed the United Nations at that time varied in their ideologies, political systems and religious and cultural backgrounds and had different patterns of socio-economic development, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights represented a common statement of goals and aspirations — a vision of the world as the international community would want it to become.

The Universal Declaration remains one of the best known human rights documents in the world. Over the years, the declaration has been used in the defence and advancement of people's rights. Its principles have been

enshrined in and continue to inspire national legislation.

The year 1998 marks the fiftieth anniversary of this "Magna Carta for all humanity." The theme of the fiftieth anniversary — "All Human Rights for All" — highlights the universality, the indivisibility and the interrelationship of all human rights. It reinforces the idea that human rights — civil, cultural, economic, political and social — should be taken in their totality and not disassociated from one another.

### A VISION OF WHAT THE WORLD SHOULD BE

Although the declaration, which comprises a broad range of rights, is not a legally binding document, it has inspired more than 60 human rights instruments which together constitute an international standard of human rights. These instruments include the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which are legally binding treaties. Together with the Universal Declaration, they constitute the International Bill of Rights.

The declaration recognizes that the "inherent dignity of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" and is linked to the recognition of fundamental rights towards which every human being aspires, namely the right to life, liberty and security of person; the right to an adequate standard of living; the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution; the right to own property; the right to freedom of opin-

ion and expression; the right to education, freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and the right to freedom from torture and degrading treatment, among others. These are inherent rights to be enjoyed by all human beings of the global village — men, women and children, as well as by any group or society, disadvantaged or not — and not "gifts" to be withdrawn, withheld or granted at someone's whim or will.

Mary Robinson, who became the second United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in September 1997, expressed this opinion when she declared that "human rights belong to people, human rights are about people on the ground and their rights". She has stated that she would take a "bottom-up" approach in promoting human rights, an approach which reflects the first words of the United Nations Charter, "We the Peoples".

The rights contained in the declaration and the two covenants were further elaborated in such legal documents as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which declares dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred as being punishable by law; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, covering measures to be taken for eliminating discrimination against women in political and public life, education, employment, health, marriage and family; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which lays down guarantees in terms of the child's human rights.

### PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

The fiftieth anniversary is a time to pro-

mote public awareness of the meaning of the Universal Declaration and its relevance to our daily lives. Providing information about human rights in the languages understood by peoples everywhere is one aspect of a global public awareness campaign. Falling during the Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004), the anniversary also provides another focus for education and action. In addition to the 200 language versions already available, a number of other local language translations are to be released for the fiftieth anniversary.

The fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration is an opportunity for people worldwide to commemorate the adoption of this landmark document. It also represents an opportunity to mobilize all strata of society in a reinvigorated and broad-based human rights movement. The involvement of civil society and non-governmental organizations in fighting for and demanding recognition of basic rights has played a central role in the advancement and promotion of human rights around the world. National Committees have already been set up in many countries, with the aim of undertaking activities to mark the anniversary.

Grassroots movements to encourage entire communities to know, demand and defend their rights will send a positive and strong message: that people everywhere are adamant that human rights should be respected. At local level, concerned citizens can approach their congressional or parliamentary representatives and ask their governments to ratify international human rights treaties if they have yet not done so.