

# Education a tool for elimination of human rights violations H.R

“WITHOUT EDUCATION, we cannot see beyond ourselves and our narrow surroundings to the reality of global interdependence. Without education, we cannot realize how peoples of other races and religions share the same dreams, the same hopes. Without education, we cannot recognize the universality of human aims and aspirations.

—United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan

— A man infected by HIV is dismissed from his office job. His supervisor, ignorant of how HIV/AIDS is transmitted but frightened of its effects, explains incorrectly to the man that co-workers would risk contracting the infection simply by being near him. Consequently, an educated and productive member of society is cast aside, even though he might remain free of the debilitating effects of the virus for many years.

— Police arrest a teenager, suspecting him of involvement in a crime. In their effort to obtain a confession, they torture him. Word spreads of the torture, and the police officers are eventually reprimanded by higher authorities. The officers involved in the confession testify, truthfully, that their superiors had never told them that torture was illegal. They add that no one had ever taught them that persons arrested on suspicion of carrying out a crime had legal rights.

Many such examples of human rights violations have been documented in recent years by the news media in industrialized and developing societies. Both underscore the need for the United Nations to increase its efforts for human rights education.

As the United Nations marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is devoting much of its energy to promoting education to prevent human rights abuses.

## Human rights education:

The need for human rights education has been emphasized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international documents and treaties. Provisions from these instruments state that human rights education consists of efforts to build a universal culture of human rights through the imparting of knowledge and skills and the moulding of attitudes. Such education should be directed towards:

- Strengthening respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- Fully developing the human personality and its sense of dignity;
- Promoting understanding, tolerance, gender equality and friendship among all nations, indigenous peoples and racial, national, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups;
- Enabling everyone to participate effectively in a free society;

— Furthering United Nations activities for maintaining peace.

## Education objectives:

A growing consensus holds that human rights education can both help reduce human rights violations and contribute to building free, just and peaceful societies. Human rights, as inscribed in the Universal Declaration, form the common language of humanity.

The objective of the United Nations in its human rights educational efforts is to teach the “com-

mon language of humanity” to people everywhere. The organization strives to make humankind fluent in the vocabulary of human rights, and to enable people everywhere — student and farmer, police officer and soldier, cabinet minister and teacher — to apply that vocabulary and meaning to their daily conduct.

Through education, the United Nations proposes to build a universal culture of human rights.

## Impetus and action:

The 1993 World Conference on Human Rights produced the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action. It reaffirmed that states were duty-bound to ensure that education was aimed at strengthening respect for human

rights and fundamental freedoms. The Declaration and Programme of Action declared that human rights education, training and public information were essential tools to promote mutual understanding, tolerance, friendly relations and peace among nations and all racial or religious groups.

The world conference also issued other recommendations designed to influence UN efforts to set out and advance a human rights education policy. The conference called on states to strive to eradicate illiteracy and to direct education towards the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It called on states and institutions to include human rights, humanitarian law, democracy and the rule of law as subjects in the curricula of all centres of learning, in both formal and informal settings.

## Decade for human rights education:

In response to another world conference recommendation, the UN General Assembly in December 1994 proclaimed the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004). The assembly appealed to all governments to contribute to the implementation of a global plan of action and invited contributions from the UN system. Equally important, the assembly called upon non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to increase their involvement in human rights education, and requested human rights monitoring bodies to emphasize the obligations of member-states in promoting human rights education. Based on a broad partnership between governments, intergovernmental organizations, professional associations and individuals, the plan has five objectives:

- assess needs and formulate strategies for the furtherance of human rights education;
- build and strengthen programmes and capacities for human rights education at international, regional, national and local levels;
- coordinate the development of effective human rights education materials;
- strengthen the role and capacity of mass media in the furtherance of human rights education; and
- disseminate globally the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

## Progress to date:

In October 1997, at the fifty-second session of the General Assembly, the secretary-general outlined the progress which the United Nations had made since the launch of the Decade for Human Rights Education. To assess needs and formulate strategies, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has drawn up questionnaires for governments, intergovernmental organizations and NGOs, and is collecting materials for human rights education produced from international to local levels.

A series of workshops are being held around the world to promote human rights education. In September 1997, together with the institute for Human Rights at Abo Akademi University in Finland, UNESCO organized a regional conference on human rights education in Europe. The conference brought together representatives from European governments, intergovernmental organizations, NGOs and experts in the field.

Many women's groups, human rights activists and legal associations are very active in promoting human rights education. For example, the International Bar Association has begun programmes to increase awareness of human rights issues in the legal profession throughout the world. Women's groups around the world are promoting the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and the Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing. The International Federation Terres des Hommes, which works to inform the public about the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is publishing comic books for children.

## Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

## Article 5

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

## Article 25

(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security, in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

## Article 26

(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

— From the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Through the years, United Nations efforts to promote and encourage respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, without regard to race, sex, language or religion, have ranged from standard-setting to monitoring, from facilitating international dialogue and cooperation to providing technical assistance, from commissioning technical studies to deploying large-scale peacekeeping missions. The universal language of human rights is the basis of universal standards, international mechanisms, and an ethical and legal foundation of rights and responsibilities of nations and peoples.

There are three dimensions to the promotion of human rights through education:

- Knowledge: providing information about human rights and the mechanisms that exist to protect those rights;
- Values, beliefs and attitudes: pro-

— Values, beliefs and attitudes: promoting a human rights culture through the development of these processes; and

- Action: encouraging people to defend human rights and prevent human rights abuses.

Equally important, the assembly