

# Focus on human rights

TODAY is the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document which was adopted by the UN General Assembly has emerged as a landmark in contemporary international relations. True, societies had even before set basic minimum standards of fundamental rights they expected their governments to grant their citizens. The Magna Carta in Britain and the Declaration of the Rights of Man in France are two notable examples of such instruments.

But until 1948, human rights were considered to fall within the domestic jurisdiction of states whose responsibility it was to ensure respect for the rights of their citizens. International law came into play only when the citizens of two states interacted with each other and that interaction had a bearing on their rights — for instance, in times of war. The Universal Declaration transformed this perspective entirely. By spelling out the rights which the UN members considered to be the defining attributes of a civilized society, the Declaration set the tone for a new approach. The rights of the citizens of a state had a direct bearing on peace and security. Hence they were to be treated as the common concern of the entire world community.

It was this new approach that gave a tremendous boost to the human rights movement. Of course, it was a long struggle before the rights recognized by the Universal Declaration could be made enforceable by law. This momentous step was taken in 1966 when two international covenants on human rights — economic, social and cultural rights and civil and political rights — were adopted. Yet there are more than fifty states which have not signed or ratified these covenants. Many more have not signed the Optional Protocol which empowers the citizen of a signatory state to bring his own government before an international body for its human rights violations. Given the instances of oppression, violation of individual freedom and abuse of human dignity that are so widespread, the situation can hardly be described as ideal.

set up to take up cases of war crimes. As a result, the moral force of human rights has become a factor to reckon with. All this constitutes a major leap forward and its beginnings can be traced back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. One cannot ignore the flip side of the human rights record, though. With the rapid globalization of politics and economics, the human rights issue is also being used as a big stick to promote the interests of the powerful nations who claim themselves to be the standard-bearers for democracy. This feeling has grown stronger over the years because the criteria are not applied uniformly to every state; economic and political considerations appear to inter-vene in what should be an objective and human approach.

This should also be the occasion for some serious soul-searching for the rulers and human rights activists in Pakistan. Regrettably, the country's human rights record is anything but impeccable. While the social, economic and cultural rights of the citizens have been made hostage to greed and obscurantism, political and civil rights are blatantly violated by the rulers in pursuit of power and to maintain and consolidate their hold on it. It is significant that of the eight most important human rights instruments adopted by the UN, Pakistan has acceded to only four. Two of them (those dealing with the rights of women and children) have been hedged with provisos which provide enough leeway for a government ill-disposed to the people's rights and interests.

The flamboyant promises made by the government of taking justice to the doorstep of the people hardly means anything. There is need for concerted action rather than loud speeches. A beginning could be made by strengthening the judicial system and reorienting the police which are the main perpetrators of human rights abuses. It is also essential to streamline the laws which contain lacunae and shortcomings which allow the wielders of power to flout the fundamental rights of the people. The

But it is a significant achievement of the champions of human rights that no government today can get away with blatant violations without a voice being raised in protest. Sometimes the protest is so strong and loud, that the delinquent government is forced to take heed. At other times the world community has actually taken steps to punish an errant state and tribunals have been

human rights activists would do well to educate the people about their rights so that they learn to resist human rights violations and seek redress when they are wronged. Similarly, they should be taught how to lobby for their rights. It is important that the thrust for the protection and advancement of human rights should come from the people themselves.