

A new century for human rights

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Human Rights
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There is a growing awareness of the importance of the right to development and the realisation of rights through development, says MARY ROBINSON

At first glance, there is little ground for optimism. The century has got off to a depressing start: many gross violations were committed while no real progress was made to close the huge gap between wealthy and developing countries.

If we try to conjure up the enduring image of the year 2000 it is mostly negative pictures that spring to mind. Two shocking images came from the Middle East: a young Palestinian boy cowering behind his father and then shot dead before our eyes; the body of a brutally murdered Israeli soldier thrown from a window.

And what of the missing images, of the violations which continue but which are no longer highlighted? We know deep down that civilians continue to be injured and killed in the innumerable conflicts that disfigure our world. We know the grim plight of the Chechen people as winter comes on. We know the dreadful toll of lives which the AIDS pandemic is taking in Africa far from our view.

One image which will stay with me is that of Cathy Freeman raising the Olympic flame in Sydney: a powerful symbol of changing attitudes towards minorities. But, in a way, the image of Cathy Freeman sums up the challenge we face in championing human rights: symbols are important but governments must deliver with real improvements, protection and preventive measures to ensure human rights for all.

The hope that a new century would mean a radical new start in instilling respect for human rights has not as yet

been fulfilled. Seeing first hand the human rights situation this year in Chechnya, East Timor and the Democratic Republic of Congo has brought home to me forcefully the challenges we face.

The strongest and most troubling impression I came away with from my recent visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories was of two people, linked by history and geography but currently separated by a wide and growing gap in their perceptions of each other. What I heard was essentially two different narratives with one side preoccupied - understandably - by security concerns and the other suffering the daily humiliation of the petty discriminations and powerlessness of occupation now aggravated by excessive use of force against them. I have recommended the introduction of some form of international monitoring pres-



A Palestinian woman protesting at the demolition of her house by the Israeli Army

ence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories to help break the daily cycle of violence - with funerals on both sides - and encourage the resumption of dialogue.

I am convinced that the way to a peaceful, stable future for the Middle East is that all involved conform to the requirements of international human rights and humanitarian law. But that raises the essence of the challenge in every region of the world: to embed a

culture of human rights through human rights education and training, to support capacity building directed to rule of law and justice systems, to ensure implementation at national level of the international human rights norms and standards.

There is a growing awareness of the importance of the right to development and the realisation of rights through development. As concern about the disparity in benefits from globalisation has deepened, so, too, has the trend emerged to raise questions about the impact of globalisation on the enjoyment of human rights. Indeed, I believe international human rights could provide part of the rules of the road to guide policy decisions which influence and shape what we call globalisation.

Accountability is a powerful preventive instrument. It sends a clear signal that people who are guilty of

gross human rights violations will not enjoy impunity but will be called to account for their crimes. The International Criminal Court should be established as soon as possible so that it can begin its work in helping prevent future violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

A unique opportunity will present itself next year to address the issues of racism and xenophobia, issues at the root of so many conflicts within and between societies. Racial assaults and murders, attacks on synagogues throughout Europe, the rise of racist attitudes and support for far-right parties - all are proof that racism remains a potent force in society. Next September the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance will be held in Durban, South Africa. The success of the World Conference will be measured by whether it produces a renewed determination to combat racism. Over the coming months it must become a people's World Conference energising young people, women - particularly on issues of gender and race - minorities, indigenous peoples, religious leaders, trade unionists, journalists, academics and the international human rights community as a whole.

My aim is to see a ringing declaration and a realistic programme of action with a review mechanism. The World Conference will be a good test of governments' willingness to match ideals with action.

The author is the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights