

HR or national interests?

Human Rights

13/12/00

The News

Dr Iffat S Malik

Sunday, December 10 was International Human Rights Day. It was marked across the globe by the usual symposia, speeches, rallies, etc. The need to emancipate women, improve the lot of children (eg by ending child labour), spread democracy and promote freedom of speech were all stressed. So too was the plight of those living in long-running human rights (HR) sores like Kashmir and Palestine.

Two thoughts spring to mind when seeing all this activity. The first, ironic and quite depressing, is that in an era when technological advances have shrunk the planet to a global village and manned international space stations are being established, there are still millions of people (especially women and children) suffering the same oppression as their ancestors centuries before. Some abuses have been eradicated (eg the Hindu practise of *suttee*) but many others (wife-beating, political suppression, torture) persist and new forms are still emerging. Ethnic cleansing represents the latest and most alarming addition to the lexicon of HR violations. Mankind's progress has indeed been chequered.

The second is that NGO's like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the myriad regional and local groups working to promote human rights and eradicate abuse are doing a very commendable job. But, at the end of the day, the most they can realistically expect to achieve is to highlight issues; make the public aware of violations. Their capacity to bring about significant change—significant improvement—is highly limited by their lack of economic and political clout; moral pressure alone rarely moves totalitarian regimes.

Abuse can only be eradicated by action at governmental and/or international body level. Abusers respond to force: economic pressure via sanctions, aid withdrawal, reduced trade; political pressure such as suspension/expulsion from international organisations; and, more so in the domestic than international context, the threat of punishment such as imprisonment. They also respond to bribes,

financial aid, military hardware, trade concessions, etc. All such actions, coercive and persuasive, can only effectively be conducted by governments.

The ideal body to do all this would be the United Nations. The UN does indeed have a large sub-organisation devoted to human rights, but its functioning has been hampered by the chronic UN disease, symptoms of which include inability to take hard decisions, inability to implement them and lack of funds. That leaves the onus on the West, specifically on the United States. As leader of the free world, one would expect the US to, one, maintain an impeccable record on HR itself, and two, use its power and influence to ensure that other countries also respect these. Is this the case?

Domestically, HR continue to be abused in America. The days of blatant discrimination (no blacks or dogs) are gone, but it is important to recall that freedom and equality in law was achieved as a result of civil agitation just a few decades ago. Furthermore, though the law has been changed, this does not necessarily mean that practise has changed: recall the Rodney King case. The American penal system has long been a particular target of HR activists: the use of leg irons, shackles, etc, not to mention the numerous unofficial forms of abuse such as beatings definitely have no place in the 21st century. Another serious cause for concern is the alacrity with which some states send convicts to the electric chair.

But it is on the international front that America's HR record really falls short. American condemnation of HR abuse by other governments is determined not—as should be the case—by the extent to which their people are suffering, but by the extent to which American interests are tied up with that country or government. One could cite innumerable examples to illustrate this point, but consider just three.

Number one: China. Few will be unfamiliar with the image of a lone student trying to stop a tank in Tiananmen Square. That image was broadcast across the globe, as was the brutal crackdown by Beijing when it ran out of patience with its young re-

formers. Over a decade on, political expression in China continues to be a very risky venture: one that could easily result in lengthy incarceration, torture, hard labour or execution. Democracy is a distant dream.

What is US policy on China? Strong verbal condemnation? Economic sanctions? International isolation? Hardly. In May this year, the House of Representatives voted in favour of granting China permanent normal trading relations (PNTR), paving the way for its entry into the World Trade Organisation. This issue had been reviewed annually for the previous two decades, and had served as a potential lever to pressure Beijing on its HR record. That lever has now been removed. President Clinton, who worked tirelessly to get PNTR for China, hailed the decision as good for the US economy. With over a billion people, China is the biggest new world market and Clinton was delighted that the US had won access to it. US-China relations have continued to improve since then; in July high-level military talks were resumed (stopped after the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade).

What of HR in all this? Well, Clinton did recently suggest to the Chinese that it might be a good idea to resume dialogue on HR issues. Not the most resounding condemnation he could have come out with. As Harry Wu, a Chinese HR activist put it, the US had the choice between voting for its conscience and voting for profit. It opted for the latter.

Number two: Saudi Arabia. Democracy is a rare commodity anywhere in the Arab world, but it is in especially short supply in the Saudi kingdom. Add to the denial of political rights, discrimination against women (enforced *pardah*, driving ban, etc) and a harsh justice system, which on the flimsiest evidence orders dozens of heads and hands to be chopped off, and a positively Taliban-esque picture emerges.

The real Taliban have to endure regular criticism of their HR record, sanctions, even bombing. And the Saudi Taliban? Well, they are one of Washington's closest allies in the region, receiving military hardware, carrying out vast trade with it, etc. On the question of HR, in particular

democracy, the US does not even make the mild suggestions for improvement that it puts to Beijing. As long as Saudi rulers continue to facilitate US interests in the region, they have a free hand to treat their people as they will.

And number three: Israel. Where to begin? A country that uses its army to slaughter children—not just a handful here and there, but dozens and dozens in a deliberate shoot to kill policy (this on top of its decades long suppression of the Palestinian people)—would, one would have thought, have attracted the strongest US condemnation. Wrong. Just a few weeks ago, Congress passed a resolution expressing solidarity with and sympathy for the government and people of Israel. Over 300 Palestinians have been killed since September 28, but Israel continues to be the largest recipient of US aid. US policy on Israel is perhaps the most blatant example of Washington turning a blind eye to HR abuse in order to safeguard its own interests.

There have, of course, been HR violations which the US has condemned. But in many of these cases too, it is motivated less by genuine concern for HR as by its own interests. Attacking a country's HR record is in effect a US policy tool. The classic illustration of this is the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. Hussein has always been a dictator; he has always oppressed and brutalised his people. While he was an ally of the West, fighting the clerics in Tehran, this was conveniently overlooked. It was only when he started threatening Western oil interests in the Gulf, that HR abuse in Iraq became a big issue. Another example is Cuba: the longstanding US embargo against the island is motivated supposedly by Cubans' lack of freedom, actually it is the ideological hostility to their communist government.

The US has to change its HR policy; it has to stop formulating this on the basis of its own national interests, and instead apply the criterion of human suffering. Only then will abuse be eradicated; only then will International Human Rights Day change from being a call to action, to a commemoration of past wrongs.