

Human rights and social development

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ALTHOUGH there is no universally endorsed definition, the United Nations defines human rights as those rights which are inherent in our nature and without which we cannot live as human beings. They are rights which enable people to fully develop and utilise their innate qualities, such as intelligence and talent, and to satisfy deeper needs, such as spirituality. Human rights are the foundation for a quality of life in which each individual's inherent dignity and worth will receive due respect and protection.

Respect for human rights is essential to social and economic progress and development. Yet, in today's world, such fundamental rights as an individual's life, liberty and physical security are continually threatened by forces of repression, ethnic hatred and exploitation.

The current situation is far from perfect. Abuses of various kinds abound, from summary executions and cruel and unusual punishment for seemingly minor crimes to spousal and child abuse and blatant social injustice. In places such as Bosnia, Haiti and Rwanda, blatant violations have led to the disruption of societies and ethnic, religious and other conflicts.

Elsewhere, too, displacement of people causes family disruption, homelessness, increased impoverishment and misery. Though far from exhaustive, the following examples reflect the nature and extent of human rights problems worldwide which disrupt social development:

★ Rwanda: During 1994 alone, between 500,000 and one million people were killed as the result of ethnic conflict between opposing Tutsi and Hutu tribes. As many as two million people have been displaced inside the country. More than 500,000 have sought refugee from violence in neighbouring states.

★ United States: Women's rights are a prime issue in the United States where a high profile double murder trial has highlighted marital abuse and domestic violence. Based on reported cases only, every 18 minutes a woman is battered in the

US; that means between 3-4 million battered women each year.

★ Haiti: In many areas of conflict world-wide, military forces use rape and sexual assault to punish and intimidate women for their real or perceived political beliefs or those of their relatives. In Haiti, between February and July 1994, 74 cases of rape were reported, some victims being as young as eight years old.

★ Former Yugoslavia: According to the Human Development Report 1994, since 1981 more than 130,000 people have been killed and more than 40,000 women raped in what was shamelessly called "ethnic cleansing". At least 7,000 non-Serbs have been displaced, sometimes through forced expulsion between July and September 1994. Furthermore, in Banja Luka, non-Serbs report that they are subject to random violence without benefit of police protection or investigation and may be compelled into forced labour digging trenches near the front lines of battle. Conversely, the Serbs (especially Bosnian Serbs in southern Bihać) have reported discrimination, harassment, detention and attack by Muslim civilians and the police and feel insecure amidst the criminal gangs and pervasive violence in what was once the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia.

★ Afghanistan: According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), more than 4 million children have been killed during the more than 14 years of war in Afghanistan.

★ Myanmar: Retaliating against attacks by insurgent forces, army troops in Myanmar (formerly Burma) reportedly inflict collective and arbitrary punishment on civilians, ranging from forced labour and gang rapes to degrading inhuman treatment, torture and even summary executions. People forced by the army to porter heavy loads of troops supplies have also served as human shields between fighting factions, and entire villages are reported to have been destroyed by the Myanmar Armed Forces due to alleged cooperation with the Ming Tai Army.

★ Iraq: According to the Special Rapporteur of

the Commission on Human Rights, decrees signed by Iraqi's Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council call for "cruel and unusual punishment" for specified crimes. These range from amputation of feet and hands to life imprisonment for such crimes as auto theft and falsification of official documents. Deserters or evaders of military service, including anyone sheltering them, are punished by having the external part of an ear cut off and being tattooed with an "X" symbol between the eyebrows.

★ Guatemala: In Guatemala, during a decade of civil war, about 1 million people, mainly indigenous, have been displaced. The region most severely affected, where 80 to 95 per cent of the population speak Maya languages, also show the highest malnutrition and illiteracy rates, housing shortages, and poor access to basic services, including water and sanitation.

★ Canada: Unemployment among Canadian aboriginals ranges from 35 to 75 per cent, reaching 100 per cent in some communities. As a result, the major source of income for over 40 per cent of Canada's indigenous people is government transfer payments.

★ Australia: Aboriginal unemployment is fivetimes higher than the national unemployment rate. Even when employed, aboriginal incomes are only half those enjoyed by other Australians.

The challenge for United Nations Member States is to strengthen their commitment to promoting and protecting the economic, social and cultural rights, as well as civil and political rights, of people everywhere.

Both development and human rights have as their main concerns survival, justice and human well-being. It can be said that the goal of development is the realisation of all human rights and that development is the process through which these rights are attained.

The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted at the World Conference on Human Rights in June 1993, also proclaimed that "democracy, development and respect for human

rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing."

The United Nations human rights instruments and the principles and standards embodied in them point the way toward higher standards of life and greater personal fulfilment.

Protection of human rights is essentially about protection of each person against violations by others, be they individual, groups or even nations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Adopted by the United Nations in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the first major international statement of the fundamental rights of all human beings. Defining human rights as inherent in human nature and essential for a truly human existence, it reaffirms that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. It is designed to serve as "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations..." and reflects the moral authority of the international community.

A selection of rights proclaimed in the Declaration's thirty articles includes:

- ★ The right to life, liberty and security of person;
- ★ Equality before the law;
- ★ Freedom of movement and residence;
- ★ Freedom from torture and cruel, degrading punishment;
- ★ The right to vote and participate in government;
- ★ The rights to education, health protection and to work;
- ★ The right to own property;
- ★ Freedom of thought, conscience and religion;
- ★ The right to social security; and
- ★ The right to an adequate standard of living.

Although not a binding treaty, the Declaration has acquired universal acceptance. Its provisions have been incorporated into laws and constitutions in many countries, as well as into many other human rights conventions and treaties since 1948. — (United Nations).