

Human rights under power politics

Human rights
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The question of human rights in conflict areas is closely tied up with the present-day policies of major actors in the international arena. From the three specific instances regarding Afghanistan, Palestine and Kashmir, some definite features of the policies of the US and its close allies emerge.

No political observer of current affairs can fail to notice that human rights are violated in the most callous way by some states and large-scale violence is used in those territories where people under occupation of powerful states are struggling to gain their right to self-determination. Instead of meeting the legitimate demands as guaranteed by United Nations resolutions, the occupiers use oppression to crush the aspirations of the subjugated nations. This is the general context in which the following specific areas of conflict can be meaningfully analysed.

In recent times, some of the worst examples of brutal oppression have been taking place in Palestine, Kashmir and Chechnya by the armed forces of Israel, India and Russia, respectively. In a unipolar world, the mightiest military power in human history, the United States, has virtually bombed Afghanistan back to the Stone Age.

The military solution to suppress the right of self-determination of subjugated nations under the false pretext of fighting 'terrorism' has reached new heights. The US administration has openly declared its policy to unleash a war against any country that it chooses to call 'terrorist or supporter of terrorism'. No power or state in the world is ready to criticize or go against the wishes of the United States when it chooses military means to further its hegemonic objectives and violate the basic norms of international law.

Let us have a brief look at Afghanistan. A systematic destruction of a defenceless country and its army by the unprecedented use of aerial bombardment has been achieved by the US. How many Afghan soldiers fell victim to the aerial war or how many civilians were killed is being kept secret. There is boastful arrogance in Washington. US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld provides one example of this. When a convoy carrying tribal chiefs and other civilians was on its way to Kabul to take part in the inaugural ceremony of the interim government, the US planes bombed it, killing at least 65 innocent people. When Mr. Rumsfeld was asked during his briefing whether he admitted this loss of life of so many people was an accident, a mistake, and that it was not intentional, he shrugged off the question with contemptuous indifference and replied instead that he was only concerned about wiping out the terrorists and that's all that mattered.

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their victims after their defeat, or the Roman generals who in their war against the Germanic tribes used to humiliate the defeated chieftains by sending them to Rome in chains to display the might of the Roman Empire.

Ten years ago, a similar treatment was meted out to Iraq. Apart from other atrocities and total carnage they wreaked, the US armed forces buried thousands of retreating Iraqi soldiers alive in their sand-shelters. The suffering of the people of Iraq is still going on due to the US policy of terror towards Iraq. This US policy was frankly summed up by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who admitted that maybe half a million children had died in Iraq as a result of the sanctions and that was a high price, but 'we (the US) are willing to pay it'.

After testing the effectiveness of their weapons in Afghanistan, the US rulers are now openly declaring that other countries are on their target-list. The United States and Israel have increased their propaganda war against Iraq and Iran to prepare public opinion or, to put it more appropriately, to mislead the world.

The question is: where do the small and vulnerable countries stand in face of the growing threat from the United States? The answer is: nowhere. This situation is fraught with unforeseen dangers for smaller countries of the Third World, which all democratic and freedom-loving people view with great concern.

The global changes cannot be seen in isolation from other political factors. In Western democracies, the weakening of the working class movements, their parties as well as the trade unions have all contributed to the enormous growth of the financial and political power of multinational conglomerates and weapon-producing industries, which reap rich profits whenever military conflicts occur or major wars are started. They influence the policies of states. Wars and other military conflicts bring death and misery to the victims but yield rich dividends and profits to the industrialists who produce military hardware and weapons. Peaceful resolution of conflicts is disastrous for these merchants of death and destruction.

Social democracy, true to its political instincts, has become indistinguishable from those parties who have been advocates of freewheeling economies and private enterprise. It is small wonder that social democrats, whether in power or jostling for power, are in the forefront of those who say 'Yes' to whatever decree the United States rulers proclaim for the New World Order and resort to military violence as a solution to the political grievances and struggles of the weak and voiceless people. The alignment of social

Nicaragua and Afghanistan are much bigger in terms of the loss of human life and material damage than the damage caused by the tragedy in New York.

There is another way to look at these actions. The terrorist actions in New York were committed by a small group of people, but the terrorist acts in Nicaragua and Afghanistan was caused not by a group of persons but by the United States.

One result of the US foolhardiness was the escalation of war of aggression by Israel with the full backing of the United States. With the world's eyes focused on Afghanistan, Ariel Sharon began to systematically destroy all the infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority. The Israeli forces have been carrying out cold blooded murders of those Palestinians whom Israeli leaders choose to call 'terrorists.' What the Israeli rulers and their prime supporter, the United States, over the last thirty-five years have refused to face is the simple fact that all Palestinians unanimously stand for an end to the occupation in accordance with the resolutions of the Security Council of the United Nations.

President Bush continuously issues imperial commands and orders to President Arafat, who has virtually been under arrest, besieged by Israeli tanks, which are stationed outside his office. He has no freedom to move, even in areas which are under the control of the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian towns, villages and refugee camps are subject to bombardment by Israeli fighter-bombers, helicopters and gunships, while ground forces keep up a barrage of heavy firing on the civilian population.

While Arafat declared a unilateral ceasefire in mid-December last year, Israel has continued the assassination of Palestinians. Israel is carrying out these killings because it has the support of the United States. President Bush, while ordering Arafat to declare a ceasefire, did not utter a single word to Israel. It is an irony of present-day power politics that the victims of military occupation and aggression are asked to stop their legitimate struggle while the brutal occupier is given a free hand in escalating its oppression.

So far, Israel has contemptuously rejected all those UN resolutions that demand Israeli withdrawal to its pre-1967 borders. At the same time, it has steadily been expanding its settlements in the occupied territories by confiscating more land and expropriating whatever land the Palestinians still have. The rejection of the will of the world community by Israel has been possible due to the active support it receives from the United States.

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An interim government has been installed in Afghanistan. The reality is that the US war has returned to power nearly all the same warlords who had misruled the country. The mistreatment of the Al-Qaeda fighters is something the world has not seen in recent times. To demonise them and to show them as lesser humans, the prisoners were herded together as if they were animals (animals are no longer treated in such a cruel way), humiliated and abused. The prisoners in the first batch were chained together, hooded and drugged, and in this condition they were paraded by the victors before the television cameras to demonstrate to the world what the US power was capable of doing. Then, they were transported by air, chained to their seats during the 27-hour flight to the US military prison at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, where they have been locked in small cages. In a similar way, the rest of the prisoners have been and are being sent there.

These sights have no doubt horrified many around the world. Even Great Britain, the staunchest ally of the US, has objected to this treatment of the prisoners. To put it mildly, this treatment of prisoners is an act of barbarous insensitivity towards the rest of mankind and gruesome on the part of the US. Recent history has no record where a great power has gone to these lengths to display this type of sub-human behaviour. Even the Nazi rulers, who committed immense atrocities, did not treat the captured soldiers of the Allied Powers in this manner during the Second World War.

This way of dealing with the prisoners (the US refuses to call them POWs and names them unlawful combatants) is a violation of all rules of international law and the Geneva Convention of 1949 with regard to the treatment of prisoners of war. But the US rulers are following the example of great conqueror Attila, whose marauding hordes of White Huns in the fifth century had little compassion for

the growing nations of the Third World. The answer is: nowhere. This situation is fraught with unforeseen dangers for smaller countries of the Third World, which all democratic and freedom-loving people view with great concern.

The global changes cannot be seen in isolation from other political factors. In Western democracies, the weakening of the working class movements, their parties as well as the trade unions have all contributed to the enormous growth of the financial and political power of multinational conglomerates and weapon-producing industries, which reap rich profits whenever military conflicts occur or major wars are started. They influence the policies of states. Wars and other military conflicts bring death and misery to the victims but yield rich dividends and profits to the industrialists who produce military hardware and weapons. Peaceful resolution of conflicts is disastrous for these merchants of death and destruction.

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For instance, the Cold War period is over and the once perceived threat from the former Soviet Union has ceased to exist, yet Norwegian governments dutifully follow the international edicts of the United States. Their subservience to the United States policies is absolute and unconditional. This, no doubt, is a matter of grave concern to all those who value democratic processes. They refuse to be fed on the lies of those powerful states that present their 'philanthropic' objectives when they start and execute their 'high tech wars' to advance 'civilization and democracy' in the Third World countries.

The question of terrorism has become the focus of world attention after the terrorist attack of September 11 last year. It was a deplorable action, which must be denounced. But there are also certain aspects of this tragic terrorist action, which are being easily glossed over by commentators or concealed by the warmongers. September 11 was presented throughout the world as if something unique in the history of the world had happened. This is completely untrue. The fact is that plenty of such atrocities have taken place before. However, most of the time, atrocities of this kind have taken place and are constantly taking place against the poor. What is distinctive about this atrocity is that a group of outsiders carried it out. It is the most powerful state in the world that has done this.

What are a few wars, the worst atrocities were perpetrated in Afghanistan against the innocent civilian population. Another example is Nicaragua, which in the 1980s was subjected to violent assault by the United States in which tens of thousands of people were killed and the country was substantially destroyed. The atrocities in

which are stationed outside his office. He has no freedom to move, even in areas which are under the control of the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian towns, villages and refugee camps are subject to bombardment by Israeli fighter-bombers, helicopters and gunships, while ground forces keep up a barrage of heavy firing on the civilian population.

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India has maintained its stranglehold over Kashmir since 1947, when the British rule ended in the subcontinent. The military conflict between India and Pakistan in 1948 was resolved by the United Nations by arranging a ceasefire that allowed the two parties to hold on to the territories of Kashmir they held at that time and established the Line of Control.

It was to be a temporary arrangement. Under the UN resolutions, Kashmir was a disputed territory whose people were to exercise their right of self-determination about the status of their land. India has been rejecting the UN resolutions over the last 54 years and has not allowed any international arbitration to settle the fate of the Kashmiri people according to their choice and wishes. India calls the Kashmir issue its internal matter. It is a false claim as over the last twelve years more than ninety thousand Kashmiris have fallen victim to the bullets of the Indian army.

There are three parties to the dispute: the people of Kashmir, India and Pakistan. Contrary to what the Indian government claims, Pakistan is not an outside power, which is interfering in the internal affairs of India or a neutral country but rather a party to the Kashmir issue. Kashmir is a political issue. What is at stake is the right of self-determination of its people. They have been deprived of the exercise of this right since the partition of the subcontinent.

The huge military build-up of Indian armed forces on the Line of Control in Kashmir and threats of war against Pakistan is to intimidate Pakistan to surrender its right to speak for the right of self-determination of the people of Kashmir. It is international terrorism and war-mongering. The only possible solution is that India accedes to the demands of the people of Kashmir and lets them decide their destiny in accordance with the UN resolutions.

— The writer is a pacifist and human rights campaigner