

Politics of human rights

Dawn
27-12-94

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AS the West demands that aid be linked to human rights, many developing countries and pressure groups, especially in Asia, are calling for a re-definition of rights.

Economically resurgent Asian countries view human rights as a political issue through which the West wants to interfere in their internal affairs. Increasingly, they oppose any attempt to use human rights as a condition for giving aid or withholding trade concessions.

The right to development is paramount, argues Malaysia.

An Asian human rights conference in Bangkok last year pronounced the right to economic development as "a universal and inalienable right and an integral part of fundamental human rights."

Asian countries argue that the West, led by the United States, applies double standards in the implementation of human rights, overlooking the excesses of its allies and overstating the vices of its adversaries.

During the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, for example, US Secretary of State Warren Christopher maintained the "universality" of human rights. But a condemnatory resolution on the human rights record of US regional ally Indonesia was toned down at Washington's insistence.

However, a senior spokesman for the London-based human rights group Amnesty International cautions that there is not one standard Asian position on human rights: "Asia is not a homogenised, identifiable culture," he said.

Similarly, Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel winner and Burmese opposition leader under house arrest in Rangoon, warned in November that individual rights should not be trampled in the name of removing poverty. In a speech read on her behalf to the World Commission on Culture and Development, she said that true development requires democracy and the empowerment of the poor.

For years after the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights", activists concentrated on individual political rights.

As developing countries won independence and spoke with a louder voice, however, they began to point out that narrowly-defined political rights were only a part of the picture and that little progress had been made in safeguarding the rights of the poor.

By 1991, the UN General Assembly agreed that "extreme poverty is a violation of human dignity, a threat to the right to life and a condition that prevents the most vul-

nerable groups from exercising their human rights."

Yet one of the most basic rights-to-food is denied to millions. One in five people still goes hungry every day and 20 million die each year from starvation and related illnesses. Without food, freedom means little.

Says Kavode Sovinka, London bureau chief of Nigerian weekly *Newswatch*: "In Africa, first we need clean drinking water. Everything else comes after that."

While the right to development has been added to the mandate of the UN High Commission for Human Rights, created December 1993, it is difficult to see how this will be monitored or enforced.

And the suffering and death caused by lack of food and water do not appear to be very high on the West's human rights agenda, which continues to be dominated by concern for civil liberties.

Critics in the South argue that

The West says it wants to link aid to developing countries' performance on human rights. But some Asian nations want the debate widened to include the right to development.

the West wants to use human rights to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign nations. The issue, they say, is not that national sovereignty should be sacrosanct regardless of human suffering, but who decides when and where to intervene.

Says Chandra Muzaffer, director of Just World Trust: "It is likely that the High Commissioner for Human Rights will get actively involved only in those human rights situations that have been okayed by the powerful within the UN."

History bears him out. During the cold war human rights' issues were manipulated by the West to score political points against communist countries.

Many anti-communist dictators with brutal human rights records were kept in power by the West, including the Shah of Iran, General Augusto Pinochet of Chile, and Mobutu Seko of Zaire.

Cold war politics also dictated Western support for rebel movements with appalling records of atrocities such as the Contras.

Gemini News