

Public Statement

6 December 2001

AI Index ORG 10/012/2001 - News Service Nr. 214

Peace and Human Rights: The Unbreakable Bond

Nobel Peace Prize Centennial Symposium

Delivered by Colm O'Cuanachain, Chair of Amnesty

International's International Executive Committee

Oslo, Norway, 6 December 2001

Your Majesties,

Your Royal Highnesses,

Members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

As I speak, Amnesty International's global membership is poised to celebrate Human Rights Day on December 10th.

As I speak, Irene Khan, Amnesty International's new Secretary General, is in Pakistan meeting refugees that have fled in fear from Afghanistan.

As I speak, families mourn their loved ones as violence continues in the Middle East and peace looks further away.

As I speak, human rights defenders in Colombia live in fear of being kidnapped and killed by paramilitaries.

As I speak, children in the Democratic Republic of Congo live in fear of being forced to fight somebody else's wars.

As I speak, farmers in Mexico wake up distressed and alarmed at the prospect of losing their lands and not being able to feed their families.

As I speak, refugees in Europe live in fear of being deported to countries where they know their lives are at risk.

As I speak, men, women and children in Myanmar live in fear of being forced into harsh labour by the military to serve the interests of companies.

There are countless individuals, fellow human beings, facing similar tragedies throughout the world right now. In numerous countries people's human rights are under attack, spreading a deep-felt insecurity that is a potent threat to global peace.

The challenge we now face, and the responsibility we all shoulder, is the struggle to make peace real for everyone regardless of background or belief.

The imprisonment of two Portuguese students for raising their glasses in a toast to freedom, led to the foundation of Amnesty International in 1961.

Amnesty International has grown to become an evolving, and dynamic force for change in our world. Since its foundation forty years ago, this grass-roots global movement of people has adapted to ensure that its focus remains firmly with the victims of human rights violations.

Amnesty International was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977 for having “contributed to securing the ground for freedom, for justice and thereby also for peace in the world.” We believed then, and continue to believe now, that by giving the Peace Prize to Amnesty International, the Norwegian Nobel Committee gave the Peace Prize to the human rights movement.

As a grass-roots organization speaking with the voices of people in 115 countries, and standing hand-in-hand with thousands of NGOs, community groups, and human rights defenders active throughout the world, we have demonstrated the flexibility and the capacity to challenge emerging forces of evil, as well as longstanding abuses of human dignity.

Even in 1977, Amnesty International’s platform was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Through the organization’s democratic machinery, our focus has continued to adapt in response to global trends, the needs of victims of human rights violations, and the directions set out by our members. Amnesty International adopted a new mission at our Dakar International Council meeting last August, moved from being a prisoners organization to a human rights organization.

In what has been a natural evolution, the indivisibility of all human rights, cultural, social, economic, political and civil, and the increasing complexity of violations which cross cut all human rights in the context of globalization, will see Amnesty International working more and more on issues relating to economic, social and cultural human rights violations.

What has not changed since 1961 is the participatory nature of Amnesty International: people throughout the world unite in force to campaign for human rights. This global movement of human rights defenders is a seamless part of the broader human rights movement

within civil society. I address you here in the knowledge that Amnesty International has responsibilities that reach far beyond its membership, and it has support that encompasses a broad constituency of activists.

At this time of global crisis, this crossroads in history, the human rights movement is galvanized in defence of human rights. For, as Nelson Mandela put it when accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993:

“This must be a world of democracy and respect for human rights, a world freed from the horrors of poverty, hunger, deprivation and ignorance, relieved of the threat and the scourge of civil wars and external aggression and unburdened of the great tragedy of millions forced to become refugees.”

Peace cannot exist in the absence of human rights. The guarantee of peace is a society structured in a human rights framework, characterized by equality, justice, and respect. A people-centred democratic society rooted in human rights, and defined by the rule of law, will create an atmosphere in which peace, security, and civil society will thrive.

In response to the horrific human rights violations of 11 September, governments -- including democratic ones are moving to restrict civil liberties and human rights, ostensibly to promote security. These same democracies emerged historically through violent struggle that saw peace take the place of war, and security take the place of suffering. Human rights became the blueprint that allowed democracy to thrive in their lands.

Now, at a point in time when human rights provide us with the legal framework for democracy and governance, Amnesty International

cannot stand by as politicians erode hard-won human rights provisions in the name of security.

Human rights foster human security, and any attack on human rights is an attack on human security.

The member states of the United Nations, individually and collectively, are shamefully silent as parliaments undo the human rights provisions upon which their nations have been built.

The very security we seek to end terrorism and violence in our world, is impossible to realise through a process which is not driven by, and focussed on, realising all human rights for all. I am reminded of the words of Martin Luther King Jr., who in his Christmas Sermon on Peace in 1967 said:

“We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. ...means and ends must cohere because the end is preexistent in the means, and ultimately destructive means cannot bring about constructive ends.”

And on this seminal occasion as Laureates gather to celebrate the award of this year's Peace Prize to the United Nations and Kofi Annan, let us remember that the Charter of the United Nations charges member countries and the UN institutions to promote and encourage respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.

The roots of conflict must be tackled if true peace is to blossom. Countless men, women and children are driven to conflict by poverty, inequality and discrimination. Festering injustices sustain a volatile dynamic of disempowerment, in which the oppressed, the voiceless, the

confused and the isolated may manifest their sense of injustice as a threat to peace and security.

Long-term reconciliation becomes possible when justice and human rights are the centre-point of the analysis, the solution, and the framework for society. The process towards peace must address the question of responsibility for atrocities and abuses. Impunity can only lead to renewed violence, as past experience has shown in Sierra Leone and other places. Without accountability there can be no justice, and without justice there can be no peace.

Amnesty International has been fully engaged in the campaign to establish a just, fair and effective International Criminal Court. This court will have jurisdiction over the worst crimes in the world: genocide, other crimes against humanity and war crimes. Amnesty International members continue to lobby their own governments to make the court a reality.

For some, globalization -- the spread of the free market economy, multiparty political systems and technological change -- has brought growing wealth, for others it has meant destitution and despair.

But, in this changing world order, what does globalization mean for human rights? Globalization can mean nothing less than a rights-based approach to the fundamental world problems that have been recognized for so long. The current global crisis is clearly presenting a comprehensive vision of these problems that includes inequality and injustice. Any aspiration towards the kind of global governance that is necessary to address the root causes and identify the solutions to the current global crisis must be based on shared universal principles. Like Aung San Suu Kyi, who reflected in 1994 that:

“It remains a matter of uncertainty how far governments are prepared to concede that democracy and human rights are indivisible from the culture of peace and therefore essential to sustained development.”

I too am unconvinced that all governments respect that indissoluble bond between human rights and peace, and Amnesty International sees it as its role to continually strive to countermand this threat.

The fact that international cooperation is increasingly defined in the context of democracy, good governance, human rights and the rule of law can be helpful..

But despite this, because the principles are not actually put into practice, people across the world continue to go hungry, to be victims of violence, corruption and exploitation.

However, it is essential to note that human rights are codified, universally shared, measurable and enforceable. They provide the framework within which notions of democracy, good governance, and the rule of law can be elaborated. Thus a human rights base is pre-conditional to the emergence of the rule of law, democracy and good governance. As Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in October of this year:

“Respect for human rights at the local and national level, including participation, independence of the judiciary, freedom of opinion and expression, provides the normative framework for democracy.”

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls upon “every individual and every organ of society” to promote respect for these rights

and freedoms and to secure their observance. The most powerful and potent force for human rights is the individual. When Peter Benenson founded Amnesty International as a letter writing campaign he knew that like-minded individuals can join together to create indestructible forces of change. One only has to look at the work done by Laureates such as Rigoberta Menchú Tum, or Jody Williams, to name just a few, to know that the individual can achieve great things when faced with adversity.

Individual human rights defenders are playing an ever more crucial role in the defence of the rights of groups who have been marginalized and silenced. Without their tireless work, those who face discrimination and human rights abuses would have little or no protection.

To ensure lasting democracy and peace we must create a society that enables human rights defenders, and places them at the centre of power. Civil society must feel empowered to channel concerns in an effective way: fighting for the respect of all rights for all.

The world has been changed radically by the tragic events in New York and Washington. The images of people's suffering that filled our TV screens and dominated the newspapers cannot be erased, but it is our duty to ensure that further injustices do not follow.

I am convinced that human rights provide the framework to ensure that security, and not suffering, can bring the stability needed. Human rights provide the framework that allows democracy, good governance, the rule of law and sustainable development to thrive. Ultimately, respect for human rights can eradicate the root causes of conflict, and nurture the ground for post-conflict reconciliation.

What I will say next is in the context of the current climate of fear.

Firstly: we must not let fear win. By responding to peoples' fear in an irresponsible fashion politicians risk eroding human rights.

Secondly: in this security overdrive what is clear is that without human rights there can be no security or democracy.

The world doesn't need a war against terrorism: it needs a war for human rights.

The current climate of international cooperation creates a window of opportunity that must be grasped with alacrity and used to build a sustainable agenda for human rights.

I leave you with a request: please join the global coalition for human rights. Please join me in securing a peaceful future for the world's children.

Please join me in being part of the solution.

Thank you.

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Last updated : December 4