

@UN WORLD CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q1:When and where is the UN World Conference on Human Rights (WCHR) being held, and who will be there?

A1:The WCHR, organized by the United Nations, will take place between 14 and 25 June, 1993 in Vienna. It is a UN inter-governmental conference at which international decisions will be made and action taken. Some 180 governments and many non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including Amnesty International, will be participating.

Q2:Why is the WCHR taking place?

A2:With the Cold War no longer dominating international relations, the General Assembly of the UN called this conference to decide how the world could realise the rights in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in a new world political environment.

Q3:What is the purpose of the WCHR?

A3:The WCHR is the most important gathering of governments to discuss human rights for 25 years. The stated objectives of the conference include a thorough evaluation of the UN's methods and mechanisms in the field of human rights since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and the formulation of concrete proposals to improve their effectiveness. With the old Cold War divisions gone, governments will have the opportunity to take steps to ensure the right of people to be free from fear of any violation of their human rights - be it starvation or torture. The WCHR will challenge the governments of the world to address the human rights issues at the heart of so many crises affecting our world.

Q4:What is Amnesty International's role in the WCHR?

A4:Amnesty International, as an NGO with consultative status with the UN and with competence in the field of human rights, has been formally invited to participate in the conference. Amnesty International will also be attending a parallel conference of NGOs to be held in Vienna before the UN Conference itself. Amnesty International has also participated fully in the WCHR preparatory process including regional preparatory meetings in Tunisia, Costa Rica and Thailand. Amnesty International will have a press tent at the conference and will be able to provide the media and others with up-to-the-minute reports on the discussions taking place in the conference.

Q5:What is Amnesty International hoping to achieve at the WCHR?

A5:Concrete, action-oriented proposals for the reform and strengthening of the UN system for dealing with human rights issues - and new commitments by governments domestically to improve practical implementation of human rights promotion and protection at home. The WCHR will take decisions that will affect human rights, the work of Amnesty International and other human rights NGOs for many years to come. Amnesty International is campaigning to make sure that people know what is at stake in Vienna and have the opportunity to make their voices heard. Amnesty

International has over thirty years experience of researching and campaigning against violations of fundamental human rights. This experience has led Amnesty International to make a number of specific proposals to reform and strengthen the ways in which governments and the UN deal with human rights violations.

Q6:What are Amnesty International's specific aims at the WCHR and proposals to reform the UN?

A6:AI is campaigning for governments at the WCHR to:

- Support the creation of a new high-level post for human rights at the UN – a UN Special Commissioner for Human Rights;
- Provide significantly increased funds and other resources for the UN to fulfil its human rights mandate – less than one per cent of the UN overall budget is dedicated to the human rights program;
- Ratify and honour international treaties on the protection of human rights;
- Strengthen existing UN human rights mechanisms such as the Special Rapporteurs and Working Groups of the Commission on Human Rights, as well as monitoring and reporting provisions of existing international treaties such as the International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights, and the UN Convention against Torture.
- Re-affirm the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights and the accountability of governments to uphold them. All human rights are indivisible and interdependent. Economic, social and cultural rights must have the same protection and priority as civil and political rights. Much more needs to be done to establish appropriate mechanisms and procedures to monitor and improve the implementation of economic, social and cultural rights, and further steps are needed to reinforce the international protection of civil and political rights.

Q7:What will be the major issues at the WCHR?

A7:The past and present failures of individual governments and the international community to end human rights violations and to respond to human rights crises should be the major challenge at the WCHR.

Some governments, however, are seeing the WCHR as an opportunity to undermine the legitimacy of international action to protect human rights. They are suggesting that international action to protect human rights is politically motivated and constitutes interference in internal affairs, and that there are cultural differences in interpretation of human rights. They are arguing for the primacy of the right to development over individual civil and political rights. While Amnesty International actively campaigns for greater international action to protect human rights and for consistency in that action, the opposition of some governments to international accountability for upholding human rights poses a great threat to those rights and to the work of Amnesty International and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Rather than take the necessary steps to fulfil their international, and frequently domestic, obligations to uphold human rights, some governments simply want to remove the obligations.

Q8:What role do non-governmental organisations play in the WCHR?

A8:NGOs from all over the world working on the frontline of achieving and protecting economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights will meet in Vienna before the official UN conference to discuss the same issues and exchange the experience

of their work. An NGO Forum will be held between 10-12 June at the conference site.

Their presence will provide a powerful reminder of the need for action rather than more rhetoric. NGOs will be in Vienna lobbying governments to take the decisions needed to meet the goals of the WCHR and to ensure that issues of concern to them are addressed. They will also be presenting an alternative view from that given by governments and demonstrating that the struggle for human rights is rooted in all cultures and societies and is truly universal. It is significant that at the official conference it will not only be the NGOs with consultative status with the UN which can attend and participate. In addition, a wide range of other domestic and regional organizations from all over the world – which do not normally have an opportunity to participate in UN meetings – will be able to participate through their previous attendance at regional preparatory meetings.

Q9: What is meant by the indivisibility of human rights?

A9: Indivisibility means that civil and political, economic, social and cultural rights are interdependent and should not be seen as more important than one another. Freedom from fear and want can only be achieved if conditions are created where everyone may enjoy his or her economic, social and cultural rights and his or her civil and political rights. Indivisibility means that governments should not ask people to choose between bread and liberty. Defining peoples' rights in such a way reflects a failure of government. Although Amnesty International works specifically on a limited number of civil and political rights, the organization explicitly supports the indivisibility of all human rights as recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Q10: What is meant by the universality of human rights?

A10: Universality means that internationally-recognized human rights are the basic core minimum to be observed *everywhere* – without regional differences. These human rights belong to everyone, everywhere, by virtue of being human. It means that, as a minimum, all governments should adhere to and implement internationally-recognized standards of human rights which they themselves have drafted and adopted. Governments do not have the discretion to decide which rights they will observe and which they will not. Domestic and regional human rights standards may set a higher level of protection, but must never fall below internationally-recognized minimum standards. Regional, cultural and historical differences can never justify violations of these fundamental rights and should not be used as a smoke-screen to deflect attention from a country's human rights record.

Q11: Isn't this conception of individual civil and political rights a product of western liberalism?

A11: The struggle for individual human rights is rooted in many different cultures and societies. This truth is reflected in the statements from non-governmental organizations that have met in all parts of the world, it is reflected in the official positions of governments from every region of the world. The failure to honour these rights equally in all parts of the world is the challenge that needs to be confronted at the WCHR Vienna.

Q12: Isn't the real challenge to human rights the selectivity of the UN and particular governments in the rights they have taken up and for which countries they authorise

action?

A12:Amnesty International has argued against selectivity and political expediency at the UN. Furthermore, some areas of the human rights program – such as those dealing with the rights of women and children – deserve much more attention than they have so far received. Selectivity in applying standards and enforcement clearly undermines the principle of universality. It is important that the principles of universality and indivisibility of human rights are upheld impartially and objectively in respect of every country in the world. Amnesty International will continue to fight against selectivity and political manipulation of human rights issues to serve other interests. The UN is critically failing to address many of the human rights abuses taking place in the world today. There is a clear lack of will on the part of UN member states to confer on its human rights mechanisms the necessary status, authority and capacity for action necessary to effectively protect human rights. Less than one per cent of the UN's overall budget is allocated for its human rights program. Amnesty International is proposing changes that would strengthen the international monitoring of human rights and mechanisms for protection; that give assistance where it is needed to governments that have the political will to protect human rights; and that would ensure that human rights issues and concerns are fully integrated into all the UN's programs and activities.