

@KEY ISSUES AT THE UN WORLD CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

The vision of a world in which the basic rights of every citizen would be internationally protected was born out of the ashes of the Second World War.

When the fledgling United Nations was hammering out its structure for a future of global peace and security, the protection of human rights was highlighted as one of its highest priorities. The first result was the proclamation in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Universal Declaration's 30 articles set down in simple and direct terms the basic rights of all people. These are held to be universal and indivisible: the rights apply to all people and no one set of rights is more important than another. The Universal Declaration has been the basis for the entire body of international human rights standards and treaties adopted by governments in the course of the last four decades.

It introduced into contemporary world affairs the doctrine that no government had the authority to violate the rights of its citizens and that the human rights record of every government should be subject to international scrutiny.

Today that vision, and the protection it tries to afford to people at risk, is under threat. Some governments are even challenging the idea of universal and indivisible human rights, questioning the validity of international scrutiny and arguing that putting global aid and trade on a more just basis must come before other issues like the prevention of torture.

The key issues at the heart of the debates leading up to and during the conference are:

Will the idea of universal human rights survive the World Conference on Human Rights?

Some governments are mounting a strong challenge to the acceptance of common international standards on human rights and, thereby, to the international monitoring of human rights practices. They are now arguing that the very idea of universal human rights conflicts with the cultures and customs in their countries or regions. Some argue that human rights must be recognized as different in different (eg cultural, religious) contexts and that human rights are a domestic government issue. These arguments simply do not stand up to scrutiny. Although some governments claim their countries' social, cultural and religious values don't square with some human rights, no government has yet shown how those distinct values justify poverty, starvation, discrimination, torture, "disappearances" or extra-judicial executions.

Will the idea of indivisibility of human rights survive ?

The Universal Declaration covers two sets of rights. One set is known as Civil and Political Rights. The other set of rights is known as Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Amnesty would like to see all governments sign and implement the two International Covenants that grew out of the Universal Declaration. In the words of the declaration, these two sets of rights aim to give all people "freedom from fear and want". The declaration does not rank these rights in order of priority.

On the contrary, they are clearly linked, with the protection of one set of rights dependent on the protection of the other.

All governments are to protect the life, liberty and security of their citizens – their civil and political rights. And they are also expected to ensure their

citizens' economic, social and cultural rights.

But many governments, as well as the media and other organizations, have used the term "human rights" in a very narrow sense, referring only to civil and political rights. This has strengthened charges that "human rights" consist of nothing more than "bourgeois rights" or "Western rights".

The indivisibility of human rights, however, means that authentic economic and social development includes the political freedom to participate in that process of development, including the freedom to dissent. When representatives of landless peasants are subjected to political arrest and torture, for example, the repression itself prevents the peasants from improving their living standards – thereby denying the victims both their economic and social rights as well as their civil and political rights.

But some governments in developing countries argue that strict measures curbing political freedoms are necessary to get their economies going.

This is a direct attack on the vision of human rights as a full spectrum necessary for justice and the full development of the human person.

What is the relationship between human rights, democracy and development?

This is a major question on the conference agenda. It is there partly because of the way in which the term "human rights" itself has come to be misused, and partly because of the politics that surround these ideals.

The Universal Declaration is unequivocal in establishing democratic norms as human rights applicable to all people. In the same way, at least half the 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights specify the economic, social and cultural rights which constitute much of the core of the world's development efforts. The debate, however, focuses on "conditionality" and "the right to development".

"Conditionality" is the increasing practice of Western/Northern governments attaching human rights conditions to the provision of development aid to Third World/Southern countries. Many governments of developing countries say this practice is unjust and inhibits economic growth. At the same time, a range of Western/Northern governments express deep-seated reservations about acknowledging this right to development since implementing it would challenge the long-standing economic and political dominance of the North/West.

Who are the most at risk?

Various governments and organizations have pressed for the conference to pay attention to particular groups of people judged to be most at risk of human rights violations.

These include: civilian victims of war and political upheaval, including people displaced within their own countries; refugees and asylum-seekers; indigenous peoples; the rural poor and others living in extreme poverty; women and children; victims of torture, "disappearance" and arbitrary killings; victims of racism, xenophobia and religious intolerance; victims of human rights violations arising from foreign occupation or from colonial, foreign and alien domination and those occurring in occupied and disputed territories; victims of terrorism.

Even on this list, governments have failed so far to agree.