

@HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE: THE FAILURE OF GOVERNMENT

Appalling human rights catastrophes continue to shock the world. In the former Yugoslavia and in Somalia, the carnage has been on a terrifying scale, with thousands of men, women and children tortured, killed or unaccounted for. In countries such as Chad, China, Iraq, Liberia, Peru and Sri Lanka, horrific human rights violations and abuses have been commonplace. The scale of these crises, and others that barely made the news, was almost beyond comprehension and seemingly beyond control.

The failure of governments to stand up for human rights across the board is particularly galling in 1993, the year of the first United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in 25 years. This forum for nearly 200 governments to debate important human rights issues is taking place against the backdrop of often appalling human rights records that contradict any professed commitment to those rights.

The United Nations' own rapporteurs and working groups on human rights spell out the failure. Year after year, the reports of these groups and the work of other human rights bodies are a shocking testimony to the continued widespread occurrence of violations across the globe.

Such increases in human rights violations could only happen when many governments have complete disregard for human rights within their own boundaries, and are opportunistic in their toleration or condemnation of human rights violations elsewhere.

In the international arena there are glaring examples of this double standard on human rights. In South Africa, for example, the international pressure on the government because of its human rights violations began to ease when the process of political reforms appeared to get underway, even though massacres and other gross violations continued apace.

While peace-keeping forces have been dispatched and procedures to investigate war crimes initiated in the case of the former state of Yugoslavia, elsewhere – in the face of escalating torture, killings and “disappearances” in countries torn apart by insurgency and civil conflict – the international community has taken no such measures. International treaty commitments and obligations have been cynically ignored by individual governments and their allies. Despite mass “disappearances” and killings by government forces and death squads, such as in parts of Latin America, the diplomatic and economic interests of governments have sometimes been allowed to prevent or paralyse concerted and effected international action.

This inconsistency has also been evident in very different situations, such as those where the security of the nation was not under threat – yet mass human rights violations still took place. In 1992, countries such as Cuba, Haiti, Iran and Myanmar (Burma) were condemned by bodies such as the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Yet the same body has still failed to agree on or utter a convincing condemnation of dreadful events such as the massacre of June 1989 in China and there has been no serious international attempt to address the widespread torture, executions and administrative detention in that country.

Superpower interests dictated a vast mobilization of international military resources when Iraq invaded Kuwait, for example. Elsewhere, however, governments have been apparently paralysed in the face of similar situations, such as the occupation and denial of human rights in East Timor by Indonesia, or in the Western Sahara by Morocco.

The past few years have seen a growing refugee crisis, with record numbers of people fleeing persecution from their governments. The governments of Bangladesh, Kenya and others accepted thousands of refugees even though the governments' resources

were stretched. The governments in Europe and the USA, meanwhile, have not done enough to help prevent human rights violations in the countries people were fleeing, and have also been turning their backs on asylum-seekers.

This unacceptable government response to human rights crises stems from the blatant disregard so many governments show for human rights in their own countries. Executions continued to spiral in the USA, with more prisoners killed by the state in 1992 than in any other year. In Turkey, the government claimed that the walls of its police stations would be "made of glass" as part of its commitment to end torture, yet torture continued and new patterns of extrajudicial executions in the south-east have emerged. And in Mexico torture continues virtually unchecked even though the country has strong commitments to human rights in its constitution and laws.