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The struggle for human dignity

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If we agree, as I think we must, that the struggle for human rights is nothing more and nothing less than the struggle for the respect of human dignity, it might be hard to understand the need for a campaign to sign up to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 50 years after it was adopted with 48 votes in favour, eight abstentions and no votes against — although South Africa's abstention could be considered a vote against. This is especially true given that the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were not only adopted by UN member states, but were also subscribed to by those countries which achieved independence after that date, on their admission to the UN. The reasons for a campaign might be even harder to understand if we take into account the fact that, despite its broad scope, the Universal Declaration contains only a limited set of rights and minimum freedoms without which the full development of the human personality is not possible.

However, all around us we see grave human rights violations still being committed in many parts of the world.

A few years ago, with the fall of the Berlin wall, the world joyfully proclaimed democracy as the only political system and heralded the birth of a new millennium in a new found era of liberty. Some years later this triumphalism has turned into a sense of defeat in the face of some of the grave ills that beset humanity. Firstly, an increased intolerance of diversity which is becoming a commonplace around the globe and which has resulted in thousands of innocent victims massacred solely for defending the right to have different beliefs. Secondly, inconceivable levels of violence and corruption generated by drug trafficking. Thirdly, a growing militarism and, fourthly, hunger which claims lives on a daily basis in the continents of the so-called third world. Faced with such a grim prospect, Amnesty International is launching this campaign in an attempt to get heads of state to publicly endorse their commitment to respect the rights contained in the Universal Declaration. Even more valuable and important is the call to all members of society to sign up, including artists, professors, teachers, intellectuals, technicians and professionals, housewives, young people, adults and the elderly, men and women, pastoral workers and religious leaders.

It is an appeal to society as a whole because society is the ultimate beneficiary of respect for fundamental human rights and the most affected by violations of those rights.

If we review the last 50 years we can see the pacifist and humanist vocation of Mexicans reflected time and time again in their defence of the most important causes at the UN General Assembly. Mexico championed the right to asylum, the respect for the self-determination of peoples and the defence of human rights wherever in the world these were violated. This attitude contrasted sharply with that of European nations and the United States of America which managed to entrench their influence in the UN Security Council.

Today our country has become one of the Latin American states where human rights are most widely violated. In the last three years, Amnesty International has documented threats and harassment against human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers, as well as forced disappearances, brutal torture, extrajudicial executions and more than a hundred people unjustly imprisoned as prisoners of conscience.

These violations occur against a complex backdrop: the declaration of war by the armed opposition group Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), Zapatista National Liberation Army, which brought the Mexican army out of its barracks; unresolved political killings, including

of a Roman Catholic cardinal, a presidential candidate and the secretary general of the still powerful official party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Institutional Revolutionary Party; the economic crisis which occurred since the current president took office and which necessitated a financial rescue plan by the US Government, paid for by slashing social welfare spending; legislative changes allowing psychiatric confinement without appeal; the granting of extraordinary powers to the Public Ministry at the expense of the authority exclusively enjoyed until then by judges; reforms to the political constitution legalizing what would previously have been violations of constitutional provisions; police abuses shielded by systematic impunity; the gradual erosion of the rule of law; and the dangerous legalization of military intervention in questions of public security. It is no exaggeration to claim that what is at stake in Mexico today is the future of Latin America, as far as a return to the notorious military regimes of the past is concerned.

Amnesty International's campaign to sign up to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a key opportunity to address the task which, as these difficult years have illustrated, is one of the most important facing humanity: that of ensuring that every human being internalizes a respect for basic and inalienable human rights, rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and protected in practically all the constitutions of the world.

This task also involves promoting awareness of human rights and promoting the notion that to respect human rights is to respect human dignity, which is every human being's birthright, without discrimination of any kind for reasons such as sex, race, religion, wealth or age.

In the face of the difficult challenges confronting the human race as we approach the 21st century, joining Amnesty International's appeal is perhaps the only possibility of building a more civilized society — one in which liberty, equality and access to justice are enjoyed by all men and women without distinction.

This is why Amnesty International is making an urgent call to us all to make the Universal Declaration of Human Rights a text for everyday reference. But Amnesty International will achieve little or nothing on its own. Let us join forces with Amnesty International to ensure that the principles contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are fulfilled and will thus represent an option for life for all humanity.

This article is one of a series of opinion pieces written for Amnesty International's campaign to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the UDHR. The views expressed do not necessarily represent Amnesty International's position.