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A CALL TO ACTION

It has been called “the world’s best kept secret”, yet it should influence the way every one of us around the world is able to live our lives. Few know what it contains, even fewer have seen a copy, yet it is supposed to be made available around the globe.

It controls and supersedes government policies; world leaders are accountable to it; and corporations and financial institutions are supposed to promote it in their business dealings. Yet to many, especially those on the receiving end of human rights violations, it could be just some old document gathering dust on a shelf in New York — its existence either forgotten or ignored. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) — written, adopted and proclaimed by the United Nations (UN) as a response to the atrocities committed during the Second World War — will mark its 50th anniversary on 10 December 1998.

By adopting the UDHR, governments promised to work towards a world without cruelty and injustice and to guarantee the basic human rights of all citizens. But what has happened in reality?

Successive governments have failed to live up to that promise. Half the world’s countries still jail people solely because of their beliefs, race, gender or ethnic origin and a third of the world’s governments torture their prisoners. Open a newspaper, turn on a television or radio and you are struck by the amount of cruelty that persists — from the hundreds of thousands of innocent women and children targeted in armed conflicts to the individual cases of people rotting in jail for signing a petition.

The UDHR forbids this and by committing these atrocities governments are breaking international human rights standards; violating international law. Yet they are getting away with abusing the rights they are legally obliged to uphold.

Why? Perhaps because governments have denied possession of the UDHR to the people of the world. They have failed to distribute it as they were supposed to do and at the same time they have argued that it is not relevant to their own particular culture or situation. They have failed to make their own people aware of its contents and then said that the people are not interested in the rights it entitles them to. In 1948 the UN called on governments to use every means within their power to distribute the text among all peoples of the world, and to ensure that the UDHR was displayed in schools and colleges everywhere in as many languages as possible. Have you ever seen it?

To transform the UDHR into a living document with the power to change our lives, it is time we reclaimed it from those governments. It is time that we made government leaders aware that it is their job to protect and promote these rights, not to violate them. It is time that we showed governments that we claim the rights enshrined in the UDHR and that we claim those rights universally, no matter whether we live in Singapore, Spain or Saudi Arabia.

Amnesty International is running a year-long campaign to promote the UDHR. Our million members will be lobbying their governments to rededicate themselves to the rights enshrined in it and to live up to their promises in protecting those rights. President Nelson Mandela was the first leader to agree to sign on the dotted line for our campaign. His government recognized the importance of the UDHR by including it in the new Constitution for South Africa.

To show governments that we support the UDHR, we need to demonstrate our commitment and dedication to it in a way that gains their attention. Amnesty International's campaign, Get Up, Sign Up!, is aimed at achieving the maximum number of personal rededications possible — from ordinary people, community leaders, religious groups, business people and government leaders all over the world. We will then present the world's largest book of signatures to the UN as a long-lasting reminder of the people of the world's commitment to — and respect for — human rights.

We need to demonstrate this support for human rights globally, because the universality of human rights is under attack. We are told by governments that cultural backgrounds or development necessities override human rights. Many governments in the North eagerly accept this view in their bilateral economic and political relationships with the South.

By showing our support we can bring this document alive, make it relevant to all of our lives, hold our governments to account for the way they treat us, and support the work of hundreds of thousands of human rights defenders around the world. Their tireless work in upholding the UDHR's ideals has contributed to improvements in the way we live. But they have paid a heavy price for that work — they have been jailed, tortured, “disappeared” and killed. We owe it to them to show that we value and support their efforts.

At this historic time, it is more important than ever that the UDHR is not consigned to history. The past 50 years have seen a gradual recognition of human rights as an intrinsic right for all humanity, but unfortunately only an elite few know that a document exists which holds governments to this view.

If we are to avoid in the next 50 years the atrocities witnessed in the last 50, we must mobilize people all around the world to stand up for our rights and make our governments respect us. Human dignity and human freedom demand it.