

# OUR WORLD: OUR RIGHTS

The universal aspiration for dignity and human rights lies at the heart of some of the most pressing questions confronting humanity today.

Millions of people have been condemned to extreme poverty, disease and exploitation.

Countries are disintegrating as war, famine and anarchy take their toll.

Arbitrary arrest, political imprisonment, torture and death at the hands of the state have corrupted the life of scores of nations.

Social injustice and intolerance are rampant and the international community has failed to protect those most at risk from oppression.

We face the threat of a world devastated by the destruction of our environment.

Each of these crises and the international response to them reflects the central issue of human rights: what are our human rights and how can they best be protected?

It is no accident that when the United Nations was born out of the ashes of the Second World War that the definition and protection of human rights was established as one of the priorities for the international community. Commitment to that task led to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It offered a new vision of a world free from fear and free from want. It placed the defence of all human rights at the centre of the quest for a peaceful, just world.

"Recognition of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" – these are the Declaration's opening words. That vision is today under threat in all regions of the world.

Neglect for the social, cultural and economic rights of millions, particularly in the poorest areas of the world has denied them those rights which the Declaration calls indispensable for dignity and the free development of the personality. Patterns of international political and economic inequality have served to create conditions in which an escape from this misery often seems impossible to bring about.

The failure to eliminate all forms of discrimination has blighted the future for much of the world's population, whether the victims be those subject to discrimination solely for their sex, whether they be ethnic, religious or other minorities who face persecution in their

societies, or whether they belong to the masses of those marginalized in their countries or denied equal opportunities because of their social or economic status.

Systematic political repression in many countries has not only blocked the development of public debate, political reforms and civil rights, but has claimed an appalling toll of victims. At the same time, opposition forces in many countries have also resorted to inflicting abuses on people as they seek political change: abducting and holding hostages, torturing and killing captives. Such atrocities are no excuse for the violation of human rights by governments. And yet, in country after country, the threat of political arrest, detention without trial, torture, "disappearance", the death penalty and other gross violations of human rights such as extrajudicial executions still hangs over dissenters and others across the political spectrum.

National, regional and international bodies that could intervene to protect the victims and stop the pattern of abuses have all too often conspicuously failed to do so, with the result that the challenge we face is a fundamental threat to human rights – a relentless assault attacking the dignity and hopes of vast numbers of human beings around the world.

**THOSE WHO STAND UP FOR HUMAN RIGHTS** have been especially targeted. Human rights associations, individual activists, social and political campaigners, and members of the professions involved with human rights are all at risk from vicious attacks. They have been blown up in bombings, assassinated by death squads, abducted by security forces, tortured and killed in police custody.

One horrific example serves as a symbol for all. In March 1992 the Central American trade unionist, Nazario de Jesus Gracias, was hacked to death in his local trade union office. He fell to the floor and bled to death. On the wall above him was a United Nations poster proclaiming the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. To date the government has undertaken no successful investigation into his death which fits the pattern of killings by death squads. In countries around the world these killings cultivate an aura of almost random, uncontrolled violence in order to terrorize and intimidate. But their activities are usually the product of calculated government policy.

Nazario de Jesus Gracias could have been any of the human rights activists who have suffered a similar fate in country after country. Killed because they worked to secure rights for the poor. To protect the rights of stretchchildren. To defend the rights of women. To establish the rights of native peoples in their country. To demand the right to democratic reform. To insist on the right for a fair trial. In short, to proclaim the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Declaration is deservedly called universal. It applies, and must be applied, to people without discrimination. No one is more equal than others, no one more deserving of rights. Rights must not become privileges: some parts of the world must not be denied the rights that others enjoy, nor must governments seek to divide off their population from the rest of humanity and accept a degraded standard of rights for their people. To do that would be an insult to our common humanity and condemn millions to perpetual despair.

THIS YEAR, in recognition of the growing importance of human rights on the international agenda, the United Nations has convened a World Conference on Human Rights. It will be held in June, in Vienna, and attended by representative of some 180 governments.

It is essential that the politicians and diplomats who will assemble there hear the voices of ordinary people who, around the world, are demanding action for human rights. The Conference in itself cannot be expected to redress the grave threat to human rights. But it is an important occasion on which to press for change on the part of governments. That is what Amnesty International and many other non-governmental organizations will be doing.

Amnesty International has drawn up a Challenge for Governments. The aim is to challenge the record of governments in protecting human rights, and to make that challenge public.

At the conference itself we will be calling for reform of the United Nations machinery for human rights protection and we have detailed proposals to put before the assembled governments, including the establishment of a Special Commission for Human rights. These are proposals which will require careful debate and elaboration in the months that follow the meeting itself, but which we hope will serve as a starting point for the improvements that are desperately needed.

Our work for human rights will continue long after the official speeches in Vienna have faded away. Later this year we are launching a major campaign to expose and halt "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions by government forces. The fact that such a campaign is needed is in itself grim testament to what has happened to our world and to our rights.

The death of Nazario de Jesus Gracias is all too poignant a reminder of that reality. His killers silenced him, but we are determined not to grant them victory.