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AN ADDRESS BY THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
IN COMMEMORATION OF THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE ADOPTION OF THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS
AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN TEHRAN
(22 April 1968)*

I should like to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to His Imperial Majesty and to the Government of Iran for their generosity in offering to act as host to this very important International Conference on Human Rights, by which we commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is very fitting that we should commemorate such an anniversary in a land whose culture and civilization are among the oldest in the world. May I express the warmest appreciation of all of us for the excellent arrangements that have been made by our hosts for the holding of this Conference. We are well aware of the magnitude of the task involved and cannot fail to be impressed by all that has been done for us.

When towards midnight on 10 December 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations, meeting in Paris for its third regular session, formally approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the President of the session, Dr. Herbert Evatt of Australia, declared that the adoption of the Declaration was "a step forward in a great evolutionary process". He added that:

"It is the first occasion on which the organized community of nations had made a declaration of human rights and fundamental freedoms; that document was backed by the authority of the body of opinion of the United Nations as a whole, and millions of people, men, women and children all over the world, will turn to it for help, guidance and inspiration."

Since that memorable date United Nations organs have given consistent and unreserved support to the Universal Declaration. Its initial provisions boldly proclaim as its philosophical basis and an article of faith that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and

* This text will also constitute the special message on the International Year for Human Rights which the Secretary-General was requested to issue in 1968 in response to Recommendation A of the Annex to resolution 2217 (XXI) of the General Assembly.

conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Consequently everyone is entitled to all rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration "without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status" and no distinction is allowed as to the political status of the territories to which the Declaration applies.

These basic principles of freedom and dignity for all, of non-discrimination and tolerance embodied in the Universal Declaration are as relevant today as when, in the wake of the horrors of the second world war, they were initially enunciated.

As an expression of the conscience of the United Nations on the rights of the individual in society, it has often been used as a yardstick to measure the degree of respect for human rights and as a basis of exhortation and action by various organs of the United Nations itself, by international conferences, as well as by national Governments. A significant point was reached when, in 1960, twelve years after its adoption, when the General Assembly itself proclaimed in another Declaration, namely, the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, that "All States shall observe faithfully and strictly the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" as well as the new Declaration which was then being adopted.

Within the United Nations family, specialized agencies, such as the International Labour Organisation and UNESCO, have found inspiration for specific actions of special importance in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Outside the United Nations it may be recalled that among many other international instruments, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms signed in Rome in 1950, lists the Universal Declaration as the international instrument which led the signatory Governments to conclude the European Convention. The Universal Declaration was invoked in the Declaration of the Caracas Conference of American States of 1954; as well as in the pronouncements of the Bandung Conference of Asian-African States of 1955, and the purposes of the Organization of African Unity include that of promoting international cooperation "with due regard for United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights".

The impact of the Declaration on national constitutions, on legislation and, in some instances, on court decisions, is another area of the effective influence exercised by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. No fewer than forty-three recently enacted constitutions are clearly inspired by the provisions of the Universal Declaration and very often reproduce its phraseology. The examples of legislation enactments expressly quoting or manifestly reproducing provisions of the Declaration are very numerous and can be found in the law of countries of all continents.

It may safely be said therefore that the Declaration has guided and inspired many statesmen and legislators. It has undoubtedly also helped the men, women and children for whom it had been proclaimed. Those who suffered from inequities, from prejudices, from humiliations, from fear and insecurity, found in it a justification for their complaints and protests and additional grounds for their claims for redress. Those who defended the victims of violations demanded its universal and effective recognition and observance. Governmental as well as non-governmental institutions greatly helped in spreading its knowledge by teaching and the use of educational and information media.

As regards the United Nations, "the great evolutionary process", to which the President of the third regular session of the General Assembly referred, continued through the years. The adoption of the Universal Declaration was followed by the approval of a number of other United Nations Declarations and Conventions which found their inspiration and guidelines in the Declaration and progressively led to the building of a body of principles and legal rules for the conduct of those whose responsibility it is to ensure respect for human dignity. These principles and rules constitute now a rapidly developing branch of international law which the United Nations elaborated for all States of the world and all communities.

In recent years, this movement of setting worldwide standards continued at an accelerated pace. The more pressing concern of the Members of the United Nations for the respect of human rights everywhere found its expression in a rapid succession of significant international instruments. The Declaration

on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination which was approved by the General Assembly in 1963 was followed in 1965 by the adoption of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Nineteen States have now ratified or acceded to that Convention; eight other ratifications are needed to bring it into force. In 1966 the International Covenants on Human Rights and an Optional Protocol were adopted after many years of consideration and study. The vote of all 106 participating Member States was unanimous and it underlined the gradually emerging common philosophy within the United Nations regarding the right of every individual, without distinction, to secure respect for his dignity as a human being - whether in the political and civil or the economic, social and cultural fields - and of the right of peoples to self-determination. The principles proclaimed in the Universal Declaration and the right of self-determination of all peoples were placed in an incontestable legal context. The International Bill of Rights, for the enactment of which fervent hopes had been expressed in the early years of the United Nations and which was to consist of the Universal Declaration, the Human Rights Covenants and the measures for their implementation, was thus completed.

At its last session, the General Assembly adopted two other important Declarations, the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and a Declaration on the Right of Asylum. By a unanimous vote of 112 Members, it also called for the acceleration of the process of ratification of the Human Rights Covenants by all eligible States. Their coming into force will be a great moment in the history of mankind.

The inclusion of measures of implementation in recent human rights instruments corresponds to what I believe is a discernible and largely held hope that the United Nations' role should be strengthened in promoting, assisting and reviewing national and local efforts to apply the standards which the United Nations has itself proclaimed and defined. Without awaiting the coming into force of these instruments, significant initiatives were taken under directives of the General Assembly to permit consideration by the Commission on Human Rights and the Economic and Social Council of certain

persistent situations involving gross violations of human rights, the principal example of which is the policy of apartheid practised by the Government of the Republic of South Africa.

The ultimate objective of United Nations efforts must obviously be the implementation of the standards at the levels where they can be enjoyed and exercised by the people concerned.

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In the light of these developments and the increasing world concern, the time seems to have come for taking stock of United Nations programmes and activities for the promotion of human rights. On the one hand, there is the remarkable effort by the international community to define common aspirations on a worldwide and on a regional basis. On the other hand, it is clear that in spite of the greater awareness and demand for the respect of the individual, serious violations of human rights, including resort to violence and terror, continue to occur in a number of places and these are made known and publicized more than ever before. Practices of discrimination prevail in many territories and in large parts of the world economic imbalances prevent in fact the enjoyment of economic and social rights, a situation which also has adverse consequences in the area of civil and political rights. The inadequacy of the international community's institutions to help in correcting these deplorable situations and in effectively encouraging desirable levels of compliance with United Nations standards is often pointed out.

Four and a half years ago, at the time of the fifteenth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration, the General Assembly declared that the whole of 1968, the twentieth anniversary year of the adoption of the Universal Declaration, should be devoted to intensified national and international efforts and undertakings in the field of human rights and designated 1968 as the International Year for Human Rights.

This International Conference was convened by the General Assembly because it was felt that an extraordinary event of such importance could most effectively assist in furthering the purposes of the International Year.

It was undoubtedly useful to depart from the routine succession of United Nations meetings on human rights for the purpose of a detached stock-taking and long-term planning. It was important to call on Governments to send specially qualified persons, including some of those who have participated in United Nations activities, as well as many who were active in the field of human rights outside the United Nations framework, in a great confrontation of cultures, historical traditions, political conceptions, religious and philosophical outlooks. A review of the situation as regards human rights in the world, if conducted in a constructive spirit designed to lead to future international cooperation, may undoubtedly contribute to a better understanding of the tasks ahead. The Preparatory Committee for the Conference has stressed the need for moderation, restraint and objectivity and of an atmosphere as free as possible from political recrimination in order to achieve the desirable results from such a review.

An examination of the degree of effectiveness of the methods used by the United Nations, its family of organizations and possibly of the role of existing regional organizations can lead to conclusions as to the strengthening and better functioning of competent United Nations organs, their present status within the Organization and their future needs.

But it is the programming of future action by the United Nations which will in all likelihood retain the most active attention of the Conference.

One of the provisions of the Universal Declaration may perhaps be usefully recalled. Article 28 states that "Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized". This far-reaching assertion by the United Nations has many implications. The experience of the last twenty years has abundantly shown that the international order which it is the purpose of the United Nations to promote and finally to establish is very closely linked with adequate respect for the rights of all human beings. It was said in the first paragraph both of the Universal Declaration and of each of the International Covenants that recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation not only of freedom and justice but also of peace in the world. It has also been repeatedly stated that, in the absence of international or internal peace, chances of genuine respect for human rights are slight.

The pattern of history before the establishment of the United Nations, and unfortunately also since the establishment of our Organization, has shown the extent to which preoccupations for the life and the well-being of the individual give way to requirements of military imperatives. Violence breeds violence. Fear breeds fear. Restraints of those who possess force disappear in situations where the use of force is openly encouraged.

Independently of international and internal conflicts, any observer of present-day realities can hardly fail to be alarmed by the persistence or even the increase of violence and brutality in today's world. Massacres, tortures, arbitrary arrests, including cruel detentions of those who are already victims of various forms of discrimination, and summary executions are reported by information media so frequently that the natural human reaction of horror tends to be dulled. The necessity of better compliance with Article 5 of the Universal Declaration, which refers to torture and cruel inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, needs particular stress. In addition, violence seems to have been consecrated in many parts of the

world as an essential element of the entertainment media, featuring prominently, for example, in television, movies and popular literature, to the point that it becomes a daily ingredient in people's lives. Such saturation of violence cannot but have grave consequences in the behaviour of communities and nations.

Economic development which should permit the achievement of essential economic and social rights - those to adequate nourishment, to medical services, to education, to work, to social security, and hence to political and civil rights and fundamental freedoms - requires mutual understanding and co-operation between nations. The common philosophy which has emerged within the United Nations regarding what are no longer mere aspirations, but rights, of every individual without distinction to secure respect for his dignity and essential needs as a human being, is an important factor of harmonious world economic and social development.

In the work of the United Nations in the field of human rights and particularly in the preparation for this Conference and the listing of its objectives, special stress was rightly given to the importance and urgency of the United Nations struggle against racial discrimination and to the persistent and intense efforts which must be made to secure its eradication, and in particular the abandonment of the policy of apartheid which, in the words of the General Assembly, constitutes one of the most flagrant abuses of human rights and fundamental freedoms. It is indeed essential that the principles laid down in the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, and the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, as well as in the related conventions of the specialized agencies, be put into practice not at some future time but in our own generation.

The impact of inferior status, of lack of opportunity to attain adequate standards of living, of permanent humiliation of the individuals concerned, is clear to all. The consequences for humanity as a whole are no less obvious. In an address to the Algerian House of Assembly which I made four years ago I said "There is the clear prospect that racial conflict, if we cannot curb and finally eliminate it, will grow into a destructive monster compared to which the religious or ideological conflicts of the past and present will seem like small family quarrels. Such a conflict will eat away the possibilities of good of all that mankind has hitherto

achieved and reduce men to the lowest and most bestial levels of intolerance and hatred. This for the sake of all our children, whatever their race and colour, must not be permitted to happen."

I hope that in proposing programmes for the future you will reflect on these and other sad remnants of the past which, most regrettably, are also current ills.

You may also wish to project your thoughts into the future. Careful attention must be paid to certain rapid developments of our societies which contain certain ominous warnings. I shall only refer to a few of these signs of danger.

Everywhere in the world the family constitutes a natural and fundamental unit and both parents as well as the children and adolescents must benefit from measures designed to allow them to live their full life. Considerable thought and concern was expressed in the last few years regarding the problem of the size of families and that of the effects of the rapid increase in world population. On Human Rights Day 1967, Heads of States or Prime Ministers of thirty countries transmitted to me a "Declaration on Population". These world leaders stated their belief that a great majority of parents desire to have the knowledge and means to plan their families and that the opportunity to decide the number and spacing of children is a fundamental human right.

The unprecedented technological development of the last two or three generations has already and will increasingly have effects on the status and self-respect of the individual. The promise which science offers is understandably high, but, having invented and perfected the machine, is man going to become himself the slave of the machine or of those few in number who will be in the position to manipulate it? Can man and his essential right to a minimum of privacy be protected against the ever-present listening and seeing electronic or other devices? How can we escape being led on the road to anonymity and emptiness so strikingly predicted by some well-known contemporary authors? Will science fiction in its degrading aspects become reality? How will democracy and the right to self-determination of peoples be preserved in a world of advanced and domineering technical development? But, of course, science and technology, although posing problems which need to be identified and tackled in time, offer as well exciting possibilities for a decisive attack on poverty, disease and ignorance which still continue to afflict such a large part of humanity. It is to the ways and means of turning science and technology from destruction to the enhancement of life that we should devote our urgent efforts.

The importance of this Conference needs therefore hardly to be underlined. Having examined past achievements and failures, having assessed the effectiveness of the United Nations machinery, it will have to point the way ahead. It must find the means to make the principles which guide the United Nations in the field of human rights more than simply words. It must examine the soundness of those principles and of the programmes built upon them as a lever for the promotion and protection of the rights and freedoms of all peoples everywhere. It must reaffirm the determination of the world community to put an end to serious violations of human rights. And it must evaluate the methods followed by the United Nations up to the present time in the light of both the tremendous needs and difficulties and the amazing possibilities that can be foreseen for the future.

In short, the Conference must find new means of carrying out the continuing struggle for the recognition and enjoyment of human rights which is so closely linked to the struggle for peace, for prosperity and for all the other basic aims and objectives of the United Nations. If it succeeds in this task, it will succeed in contributing to the improvement of the condition of mankind. For it may be, if sufficient dedication is shown and a sufficient effort is made, that it will be the historic privilege of our generation to bring about conditions in which human beings would be assured of life in the kind of dignity which our civilization can perhaps for the first time afford to provide and which men, women and children everywhere so richly deserve.

In order to be effective these noblest of efforts must in our time be international and co-operative in character.

Last summer in a speech I made in the United States, I expressed my profound belief that real and effective international co-operation can only be achieved if there is an awareness at all levels that no man can save himself or his country or his people unless he consciously identifies himself with and deliberately works for the whole of mankind.

The magnitude of our task is obvious. Its importance is paramount. I invite the Teheran Conference to seize the opportunity of a unique worldwide gathering to make a decisive contribution. I convey to those in Government and official positions, in universities and schools, in workers' and employers' organizations, the lawyers, the women, the young, all the humanitarians who have accepted the challenge of the International Year for Human Rights, my appreciation for the work they are doing and my high expectations of the results which they will achieve for their fellow men.

This is my message for the International Year for Human Rights.