

Embracing Tension: Human Rights 365

On the occasion of Human Rights day 2014, I am encouraged to see a level of awareness manifested in both the increasing claims for justice and respect by ordinary people, as well as the pronouncements by the Government that these claims are being heard and that reforms will follow. We are witnessing such reforms pursued vigorously in the field of education, commerce and public administration, for example, despite formidable obstacles. Without exception, everyone whom I've come across who was here ten years ago and is still, or again, here today marvels at the progress they see. Surely a country that is producing the best rice in the world and attracting investment and tourists at the pace we see here is doing something right.

Despite shortcomings, the three fundamental laws on the judiciary lay down some foundations for improved court administration. Similarly, important steps are being taken in the fields of anti-corruption, environmental impact assessments, and many others.

These advances, however, are overshadowed by many incidents that show why reform in these areas is needed in the first place. The controversy surrounding the independence of the judiciary remains as heated as ever. There are those who will spend Human Rights Day struggling to defend their land, apply for asylum, recover from acts of violence, or simply express their demands. If one has to risk their life or freedom to do any of that, then surely something is not right. Regaining public confidence will undoubtedly require more of the kind of dramatic reform seen in education.

The global theme of Human Rights Day this year is "Human Rights 365". It reminds us that human rights are important to every person on every day of the year. It should be a day for everyone to come together, to take stock of achievements and challenges, and to reaffirm our values and commitment to advancing further in the year to come. With obstacles placed in the lead-up to today in certain provinces, we would have been led to wonder just how much progress has really been made had most events not then proceeded peacefully, which fortunately seems to be the case (as of writing).

In the international arena, debates about the extent and limits of human rights have allowed commonly held views, such as those relating to culture, tradition, national sovereignty, and new ones emerging, such as on security threats from terrorism, to benefit from arguments and counter-arguments. Many of them were laid to rest in the process, demonstrating that the best way to bridge gaps is through more openness and dialogue, not less. In this spirit, the reasons why the process of judicial reform here in Cambodia has not diminished the calls for independence will hopefully be explored in depth at next week's Conference on the dissemination of the three fundamental laws on the judiciary.

While frank dialogue between opposing views will be tense by definition, embracing this tension is the first step towards resolving its causes. Indeed, perhaps we are witnessing this first step being taken. The sooner, the better, for the expectations of a population in an economy in high gear can only increase with time, and thus so will the tensions in society.

This year's message is dedicated to all persons on every side of every disagreement. Human rights belong to all of us, 365 days a year.

Ms. Wan-Hea Lee
OHCHR Representative in Cambodia
