

Human Rights Day 10 December 2010: Statement by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay

Since the United Nations was established over 60 years ago, there have been dramatic advances in crafting and implementing a system of universal human rights – rights which are, under international law, applicable to each and every one of us: old and young, male and female, rich and poor, whoever we are and wherever we are from.

We know the names of some of those who changed human rights history: those who were in the vanguard of the struggle to abolish slavery, such as William Wilberforce; those who engineered major advances in women's rights, such as Gloria Steinem, Huda Shaarawi and Simone de Beauvoir. We also know about those who tackled the injustice of colonialism such as Mahatma Gandhi, and those – like Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Rigoberta Menchu – who campaigned to end institutionalized racism and discrimination against minorities and indigenous peoples.

But these inspirational figures could not have done what they did without the help of many others whose names we don't know. Efforts to end slavery spanned 1,000 years, and still continue with adults and children being trafficked for sex and indentured labour. After a mammoth struggle that lasted more than 150 years, women have won the right to vote almost everywhere, but still lack many other fundamental rights.

We owe the progress we have made to the enormous efforts of hundreds of thousands of largely unsung heroes, known collectively as human rights defenders.

Human rights defenders come from all walks of life, ranging from princesses and politicians, to professionals such as journalists, teachers and doctors, to people with little or no formal education. There are no special qualifications. All it takes is commitment, and courage.

We can all be human rights defenders, and – given how much we owe to others for the rights many of us now take for granted – we all *should* be human rights defenders. At the very least, we should do our utmost to support those who do defend human rights. Every year, thousands of human rights defenders are harassed, abused, unjustly jailed and murdered. That is why Human Rights Day 2010 is dedicated to Human Rights Defenders and their courageous battle to stop discrimination of all sorts. We need to stand up for their rights as much as they stand up for ours.

Some of those who are unjustly detained become the subject of international efforts to win their freedom. This spotlight can provide them with a significant measure of physical protection, even if it does not always win them a speedy release. But most of those detained by repressive authorities languish largely unnoticed in jails, under house arrest, in 're-education centres.' Often their families are targeted as well.

Some of those killed – like Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, murdered outside her apartment in 2006, and Floribert Chebeya Bahizire, the Congolese human rights defender found dead in his car earlier this year – are remembered and revered. But many of those less well-known defenders who are murdered for their belief in human rights remain unknown to the wider world.

The work of human rights defenders is as vital today as it has ever been, because hundreds of millions of individuals still suffer directly or indirectly from some form of discrimination every day.

There are an estimated 370 million indigenous people in the world, a great many of whom face discrimination. Even in the developed world, the life expectancy of some groups of indigenous children born today is up to 20 years less than that of non-indigenous children.

Minorities suffer similar disparities. In Latin America, for example, the some 150 million people of African descent tend to be trapped in poverty to a much greater degree than other sectors of the population. Similarly, of the estimated 650 million people with disabilities, more than two thirds (426 million) are living below the poverty line in developing countries.

Women – half the world's population – still face rampant discrimination in some societies, and more subtle versions in others. One of the most alarming of many depressing statistics on this issue, is that 70 percent of the 70-100 million children who are not attending school are girls.

Around 100 million people are forced into poverty each year because they have to pay for health care. In many countries, children from poor backgrounds are 10 times less likely to be vaccinated than those whose parents are better off, and poor women are up to 20 times less likely than the richest 20 percent of women to give birth in the presence of a skilled health worker capable of saving their lives.

The more than 200 million migrants worldwide, and especially the irregular and undocumented migrants among them, face racism, xenophobia and other chronic forms of discrimination, in both developed and developing countries.

These are some of the daunting challenges facing today's and tomorrow's human rights defenders. I wish to salute their selfless determination. They work tirelessly in on all the issues singled out above, and many more besides – for example sexual orientation and the rights of stateless people, older people and those living with HIV.

One important set of statistics is missing: we have no idea how many human rights defenders there are, or how many of them are intimidated, harassed, beaten up, jailed or killed each year. We have also failed to develop ways to measure their successes, which are often credited not to them but to the politicians or governments that finally listen to them or give in to their pressure. We need to do a much better job of defending our defenders.

The 21st century is witnessing the emergence of new economic and political forces, which, like others before them, will face the responsibility of promoting development at home and abroad while at the same time being held accountable for their actions. Human rights defenders will play a crucial role in this process, by pointing out flaws and benefits in current and future policies and actions. Yet, despite the benefits they bring to society, in some parts of the world they are facing increased harassment, persecution and restrictions on their activities, especially freedom of speech.

On this Human Rights Day, I call on Governments to acknowledge that criticism is not a crime, and to release all those people who have been detained for peacefully exercising their fundamental freedoms to defend democratic principles and human rights.

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