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Guest Columnist

The day when human rights went global

On this 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the U.S. should prioritize the U.N. campaign to make human rights the cornerstone of global politics.



Eleanor Roosevelt pushed hard for the Declaration of Human Rights. Here she holds a poster of the declaration in English. [Exact date unknown] [Provided]

On Dec. 10, 1948 — 75 years ago — the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is hard to talk about rights and ethics in international affairs while innocent civilians are being killed in the ongoing wars in Israel/Gaza and Ukraine.

Our world seems dominated not by universal values, but by violence, hatred and power politics. Yet, during this painful time, we must not lose sight of the evolution of human rights around the world. While war and terrorism continue to pull us apart, the creation of a global ethic of human rights helps to bring us together.

Human rights are not “things” that individuals have, like hands, ears and toes. Human rights are simply claims or entitlements that derive from legal or moral rules designed to alleviate suffering. One is entitled to these claims simply because she or he is a human being. Human rights are designed to protect individuals and groups against not only the arbitrary exercise of state power, but also from the suffering caused by global terrorist organizations as well.

Human rights claims codified in international law embrace norms of freedom, equality and fraternity.

Freedom: Human rights based on principles of freedom are familiar to American citizens and encompass: rights to life, liberty and security; freedom from racial discrimination, slavery, torture, arbitrary arrest; freedom to a fair trial, movement, asylum; freedom of expression, religion and thought.

Equality: Human rights law also contains norms of equality, including: the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of self and family; rights to education, social security and unemployment protections

Fraternity: Individual states acting alone can no longer satisfy their human rights obligations. In our new era of global interdependence international cooperation is required to solve contemporary problems. A new category of rights has thus emerged reflecting the norm of fraternity, including the right to peace, the right to a healthy and balanced environment, and the right to humanitarian disaster relief.

In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was the first U.N. document to provide a clear list of human rights. The declaration includes both civil and

political rights (such as, freedom of speech and religion) and economic, social and cultural rights (such as, health care and social security). Since adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the U.N. has pushed through an impressive corpus of international human rights law covering protections for women, racial minorities, migrants, children, refugees and prohibitions against apartheid, torture and genocide. When states approve these treaties, they are required to incorporate the human rights protections into their domestic legal systems.

It is sometimes suggested that, given the diverse cultures and political systems of the world, there can be no fully universal concept of human rights. Rosalyn Higgins, the former president of the International Court of Justice, answered this charge directly: “I believe, profoundly, in the universality of the human spirit. Individuals everywhere want the same essential things to have sufficient food and shelter, to be able to speak freely; to practice their own religion or to abstain from religious belief; to feel that their person is not threatened by the state; to know that they will not be tortured, or detained without charge, and that, if charged they will have a fair trial. I believe that there is nothing in these aspirations that is dependent upon culture, or religion or stage of development. They are as keenly felt by the African tribesman as by the European city-dweller, by the inhabitant of a Latin American shanty-town as by the resident of a Manhattan apartment.”

On this 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the U.S. should prioritize the U.N. campaign to make human rights the cornerstone of global politics. Many U.S. citizens assume that the United States is at the forefront of the global movement for human rights. Yet, only former Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter spent key political capital to push forward an international human rights agenda. As a consequence, the U.S. has only ratified five of the 18 central human rights treaties.

The United States continues to refuse to ratify the overall treaties protecting children, women, migrant workers, people with disabilities and people victimized by enforced disappearances. This poor ratification record makes the United States government appear hypocritical when it lectures other states on human rights issues.

The United States can reverse course, ratify the outstanding human rights treaties and play a leading role in the U.N. human rights system. The human rights movement continues to evolve in dynamic, ever-changing and unanticipated ways. Human rights are now central to modern diplomacy, represent a global vision of ethics and morality, and play a critical role in the world's political, legal and moral topography. Nelson Mandela declared: "Human rights have become the focal point of international relations." The United States should embrace this vision and become a central leader in the world struggle for international human rights.



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