

Preface

The international conference held in Utrecht on the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a remarkable occasion. It brought together outstanding international experts from around the world to shed light on various aspects of human rights. I welcome the publication of this book which contains their contributions. It provides the reader with impressive testimonies about the overall importance of human rights.

The fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was an appropriate moment to look back at what has been achieved since 1948. A vast array of international human rights standards has come into being. We all know that certain States do not respect them at all, while others do so only partially. But this does not mean, therefore, that the standards have no significance. They reflect international consensus about the rules States are at least supposed to respect in various fields. This is of vital importance in creating a world for all humankind based on the rule of law respecting the human rights of everyone. To this end, the standards also provide valuable guidelines for international organs trying to determine the extent to which various States live up to their obligations, and the basis on which such organs can recommend changes in national laws and policies with a view to bringing the practice of States into conformity with their obligations. This is true for the supervisory bodies established under the various human rights treaties as well as for the Commission on Human Rights. Beyond this, the standards provide a firm basis for the activities of non-governmental organizations seeking to promote human rights.

Elaboration of the substantial catalogue of human rights standards has been a great achievement of the United Nations. The challenge is now to make these standards meaningful for all human beings through effective implementation at the national level. One should not forget that this is a matter not only of justice, but also of peace and security. The commitment of the United Nations to human rights followed the great wars of the first half of this century, against which the international community united to build a new regime which would prevent the re-occurrence of such death, destruction and human suffering. Looking ahead, I do hope that human rights activists will continue to pay a great deal of attention to the relationship between human rights and the maintenance of peace and security. It is clear that oppression inevitably leads to tensions, and can eventually lead to destabilization of a State. This in turn often leads to serious international repercussions. The drama in Kosovo provides a classical example. This tragedy has its origins in the decision of Milosevic in 1989 to rob the Kosovars of their autonomy. The systematic policy of oppression in the years that followed eventually led to the beginning of armed resistance against the regime. Milosevic's policy of breaking Kosovar resistance by expelling hundreds of thousands of them has led to destabilization of Macedonia and Albania.

Against this background, it is regrettable that a minority of the members of the UN Security Council continues to oppose the discussion of grave and persistent violations of human rights, notwithstanding the fact that since World War II there have been numerous cases in which violent conflict was caused by a policy of oppression. As a consequence, the chances of the Security Council taking timely action in order to remove threats to peace and security are considerably reduced.

There are, however, also more encouraging developments. The old dogma that a State could not be criticized by other States for its bad human rights record because this would constitute an impermissible interference in its internal affairs no longer finds many supporters. At least among States participating in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the 1991 Moscow Conference on the Human Dimension relegated the old dogma to the dustbin of history by declaring that ‘the commitments undertaken in the field of the human dimension of the CSCE are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating states and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the state concerned’. Equally encouraging is the fact that the European Union keeps its doors closed for States which do not have a properly functioning democracy and which do not respect human rights.

The number of States which do not respect human rights is still alarmingly high. But, we also see a growing awareness amongst peoples in all continents that peace can never be secured – and social and economic development will remain significantly constrained – as long as massive violations of human rights continue to occur. Reflecting this growing popular awareness, the number of human rights activists is increasing constantly throughout the world. States can hardly ignore the demands which they articulate. This gives hope for the future.

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