

Human Rights: Changes and Challenges—1990–2010

—Derek Evans

We are gathering on International Human Rights Day, at a time when the very concept of the promotion and protection of human rights is under serious challenge and strain. Nations are debating what level of torture should be deemed permissible, and under what circumstances one country may attack another to protect its interests from potential terrorist threats. UN officials search for evidence of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ in the palaces and factories of a country where other UN officials estimate that more than 500,000 children have died as a direct result of international economic sanctions.

Human Rights Day celebrates the proclamation in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights when, in the rubble and aftermath of war and genocide, the international community dedicated itself to the simple, sacred phrase: “Never again.”

I continue to say that as a prayer, and to believe in the vision that it reflects. I believe in it because in my life I have seen intimately the consequences of the betrayal of the dream, and because I have also seen, now and then, a glimmer of its real promise.

My time at Amnesty International coincided with a period of massive change in the field of human rights. It has become commonplace for our society to point to September 11 as a moment when the world changed. For most of humanity, the world really did change in significant ways recently, in the months and years immediately following the collapse of another symbolic structure of Western architecture in 1989—the Berlin wall.

The end of the Cold War created a new political environment and, finally, a vital opportunity to remove the ideological barrier that had served as the great excuse for not moving forward in the practical implementation of justice and

peace, for respecting human rights and realizing a safer and healthier world for all humanity.

In some ways, the ‘peace dividend’ did make a meaningful contribution to creating a framework for fulfilling these hopes. In the field of human rights, for example, a range of positive measures was initiated: the reform of the UN and other international agencies on the basis of ‘human rights mainstreaming’ and the strengthening of civil society, a formal renewal of and practical plan for implementing the Universal Declaration (Vienna Declaration); an international commitment to the promotion of a protection of the rights of women (Beijing Action Plan); movement towards addressing impunity through the establishment of an International Criminal Court (*Statute of Rome*); and

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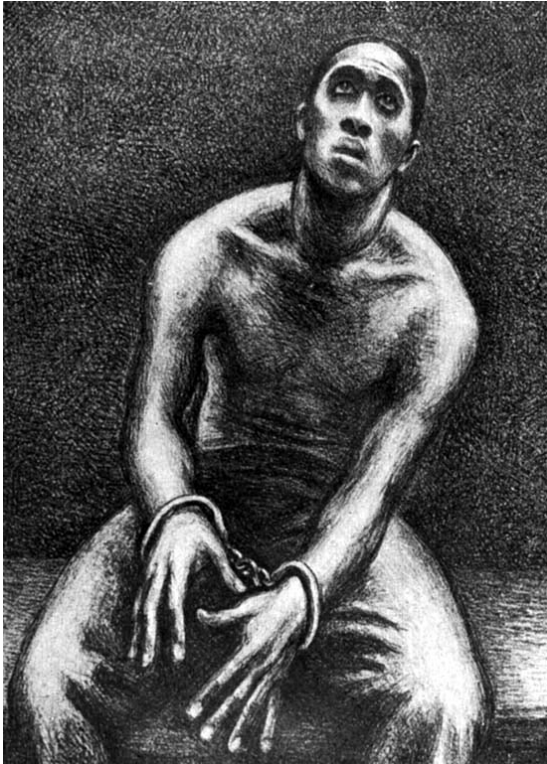
the creation of an infrastructure to support the role of human rights defenders (*General Assembly Declaration*).

The international community began to open up important new fields for public policy debate and decision-making, such as the question of the responsibility and accountability of business, trans-national corporations, armed opposition groups and other non-state actors in relation to the promotion of human rights and the protection of the environment.

The end of the Cold War also meant, however, that whole regions of the world—such as Africa and Central Asia—ceased overnight to hold any strategic interest in the eyes of those

with political and economic power, and were summarily marginalized and then abandoned. Just as suddenly, warlords and dictators who had served as superpower surrogates—created, sponsored and to some extent controlled by either the Soviet Union or the West—were let loose upon their countries to pursue their own interests or private grievances without restraint, sometimes acting as agents of convenience for the big corporations and other forces of globalization in an increasingly unregulated and competitive world. Although the ‘cold’ international struggle was over, the number of ‘hot’ domestic conflicts proliferated from about 30 to more than 80 within the first five years of the decade.

From a human rights perspective, these developments brought with them a significant change to the nature of the violations experienced by ordinary people around the world. The pattern no longer tended to be primarily one in which individuals were targeted by repressive governments because of their ideological beliefs or political involvements and punished with arbitrary imprisonment and torture. Over the course of the 1990s, human rights violations escalated in severity and scale, and changed from being focussed on the repression of beliefs to an assault on identities—whether gender, language, religion or ethnicity. Violations occurred less as a political or institutional control strategy, and more as a characteristic of situations of social and structural breakdown. In the war that increasingly defined the lives of more and more people, the key question changed from being “what side are you on?” to simply “who are you?” Instead of attempting to control one’s enemies, the perpetrators of human rights violations increasingly sought to eliminate them. The forms of mass terrorism that the whole body of international human rights law was created to ensure would “never again” be part of the human experience erupted again throughout the world: genocide in Central Africa, ethnic cleansing in Eastern Europe, the slavery of women and children in large parts of Africa and Asia.



separation is a luxury we cannot afford. Whether in the former Yugoslavia, in Central Africa, in the Middle East, in the relations between the West and Islam, or in our own communities, we need to learn the skills and engage the task of reconciliation—of recognizing that, whether we like it or not, we are in each other's future, and of determining to relate to each other on the basis of our authentic identity rather than simply on the basis of our perceived roles as victim and perpetrator. Learning the way of reconciliation is an urgent task and will require the risk of experimentation, but if there is to be a long term we have no choice. Learning the way of reconciliation is that practice of being present to the future, rather than being bound to the past.

But there is almost no corner of the world where even the poorest and most marginalized people do not know and believe that it is not deserved, that it is not their due, that it is wrong. I believe this global awareness is one of the achievements of the last decade or two. Though largely unrecognized, I believe it represents both a revolutionary change and a real basis for hope, for it expresses an embracing of the bond that unites us and creates the ground upon which we might commit ourselves to ensuring that it is realized for each other—to create the values we know to be right.

Derek Evans offered these thoughts at an Institute for the Humanities reception on Human Rights Day, December 10, 2002. Derek Evans is the Executive Director of Naramata Centre in Naramata, BC. Prior to coming to BC, he served as the Deputy Secretary General of Amnesty International, based in London.

For most people in most of the world, despite great efforts and many achievements, the 'new reality' was that the world was a much harsher and more dangerous place at the beginning of the new millennium than it had been at the beginning of the 1990s.

This period of massive change continues, and we are faced with some major challenges if human rights are to become a meaningful reality in this decade. The good news is that most of these things are within our grasp, if we have the will and the determination.

Although absolutely vital in the immediate term, I am concerned that much of our efforts at peace-keeping, conflict resolution and mediation may tend in the longer term to reinforce and even perpetuate problems in that our efforts are oriented to obtaining and enforcing agreement on the terms of separation of those who have been in conflict, rather than establishing the bases of their future relationship.

In an increasingly globalized world,

Once we embrace our full humanity and claim our inherent dignity, there is no going back. Grave violations of human rights—torture, indiscriminate killings, and the acts of mass terrorism—will certainly continue to occur, in many situations with increasing severity.

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