



Human Rights as an International Issue

End of Cold War strengthened international human rights efforts

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President Jimmy Carter and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Desmond M. Tutu in 1986. (© AP Images)

(The following article is taken from the U.S. Department of State publication, Human Rights in Brief.)

Today, nearly all states in all regions of the world, at all levels of development, proclaim their commitment to human rights. A government that engages in a consistent pattern of gross human rights violations is widely considered to be illegitimate.

This was not always the case. A nation's progress on human rights — or lack of it — has been an established subject of international relations for only about half a century. Prior to World War II, massacres of ethnic groups within a country were met with little more than polite statements of disapproval. Less flagrant violations were

not even considered a fit subject for diplomatic conversation.

How a government treated its own citizens in its own territory was considered to be a matter of its sovereignty — that is, the supreme power it had over its internal affairs. In fact, other states and the international community were considered to be under an international legal obligation not to intervene in such matters.

Shock of Holocaust

In the Holocaust during World War Two, Nazi Germany and its collaborators systematically murdered millions — European Jews, Roma, homosexuals — including men, women, and children. The revulsion at this inconceivable brutality caused an extraordinary intellectual change. The sense of responsibility for the Holocaust generated the pledge that its cruelties should never be repeated. Human rights entered the mainstream of international relations. Prior to the Holocaust some countries had used the excuse that a state's treatment of its own citizens was a domestic affair. The massacre of one's own citizens was not an established international legal offense.

The Nuremberg War Crimes Trials in 1945 helped to change the situation. The trials, at which high-level Nazis were held to account for their actions, introduced the idea of crimes against humanity. For the first time, officials were held legally accountable to the international community for offenses against individual citizens. It was in the United Nations, however, that human rights really emerged as a subject of international relations. Human rights have a prominent place in the U.N. Charter adopted in 1945. On December 10, 1948, the U.N. General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This comprehensive list of rights declared that the way in which states treat their own citizens is a matter of legitimate international concern and subject to international standards.

Effect of the Cold War

However, not everything proceeded smoothly. In the years following World War II, an intense ideological struggle broke out between Communist and capitalist nations, which had repercussions around the world. The "Cold War" lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Just as the United States was sometimes willing to ignore human rights lapses in "friendly" anti-Communist regimes, the Soviet Union was ready to use force when necessary to assure "friendly" totalitarian regimes in its sphere of influence.

Furthermore, few states were willing to allow even multilateral monitoring of national human rights practices, let alone international implementation or enforcement. The United Nations is not a world government. It can do nothing that its members — sovereign states — do not authorize. During the first two decades of the Cold War, neither bloc was willing to allow the United Nations to do much at all in the field of human rights.

By the mid-1960s, though, the Afro-Asian bloc had become the largest group in the United Nations. These countries, which had suffered under colonial rule, had a special interest in human rights. They found a sympathetic hearing from the Soviet bloc and some countries in Europe and the Americas, including the United States. The United Nations thus once again began to attend to human rights.

This led, most significantly, to completion of the International Human Rights Covenants in December 1966. Along with the

Universal Declaration, these treaties provide an authoritative statement of internationally recognized human rights.

The comprehensiveness of the Covenants, however, demanded that the United Nations shift its human rights work from setting standards to monitoring how states actually follow those standards. This was an area where the organization had made virtually no headway in its first two decades.

Although the core concepts of human rights norms were clarified by the mid-1960s, implementation of those norms remained almost entirely up to the will of individual national governments.

The Carter Revival

When Jimmy Carter became president of the United States in 1977, he raised the profile of human rights as an international issue. Carter made the theme of universal rights a priority for American foreign policy, encouraging the advocates of human rights throughout the world.

Carter attempted to disentangle international human rights from the East-West politics of the Cold War and from North-South arguments between the industrialized and nonindustrialized countries over economic matters. This gave new momentum and increased legitimacy to human rights organizations everywhere.



Eleanor Roosevelt, widow of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, holds the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (UN photo)

The Helsinki Process

The mid-1970s also saw the introduction of human rights into the mainstream of multilateral and bilateral foreign policy. The United States and European countries began to consider human rights practices in their aid policies. And the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 explicitly introduced human rights into the mainstream of U.S.-Soviet relations.

The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) began in the early 1970s as a series of talks involving the United States, Canada, the Soviet Union, and almost all the countries of Europe. Discussions focused on resolving issues between the Communist East and democratic West. The CSCE's final act, reached in 1975 in Helsinki, Finland, and signed by 35 countries, became known as the Helsinki Accords. The accords cited 10 specific principles, including respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms such as freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief. Many experts credit the Helsinki process with helping to bring about the fall of Communist dictatorships in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe.

By the end of the 1980s the Cold War had come to an end, and on December 25, 1991, the Soviet flag was lowered from the Kremlin. The CSCE, which up to this point had convened meetings and conferences, now took on a greater role—managing the historic change taking place in Europe. Its name changed to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It is now the largest regional security organization in the world, comprising 56 countries from Europe, Central Asia, and North America. It also has partner states in Asia and the Mediterranean region. Many people see the OSCE as a prototype for other regional cooperative efforts to forge greater respect for human rights in other parts of the world. The Copenhagen Declaration and the Paris Principles of the OSCE have become enormously influential as a measure for human rights performance, including the record of democratic states.

Within the United Nations, a revitalized Commission on Human Rights, led by Canada, The Netherlands, and others, formulated new treaties on women's rights (1979), torture (1984), and the rights of the child (1989). Experts were appointed to study and report on human rights violations in a growing number of countries.

By the mid-1980s, most Western countries agreed that human rights should be an active concern of foreign policy, and turned to the issues of monitoring and enforcement.

The 1970s was also the decade in which nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with human rights emerged as a notable international political force. This was symbolized by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Amnesty International in 1977 for its assistance to political prisoners. By 1980, there were some 200 NGOs in the United States that dealt with human rights, and about the same number in Great Britain. The emergence of NGOs in the countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America has been an equally important development. These groups, in addition to their advocacy for victims of human rights abuses, have been important in influencing national and international human rights policies.

The Post-Cold War Environment

Since the end of the Cold War, international efforts to promote human rights have been further strengthened. An example is the creation of a U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, bringing about increased international monitoring. In most countries, the nature and boundaries of human rights have become more deeply entrenched on the national agenda. As liberal economic ideas have spread through globalization, so have other ideas. Nongovernmental human rights organizations and advocates have become increasingly influential worldwide.

To be sure, raising human rights issues is sometimes still resented by states, as illustrated by the strained relations between China and its major trading partners in the years following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre of Chinese citizens. And most states still refuse to press international human rights concerns strongly enough to satisfy many human rights NGOs.

There are still regimes in power—in Cuba, Burma, North Korea, and elsewhere—that engage in systematic violation of internationally recognized human rights. And, as documented in the reports of the U.S. Department of State and various

NGOs, most countries of the world still have significant human rights problems.

Nonetheless, there is a new willingness within the international community to tackle systematic human rights violations. It is regrettable that, in 1994, the United Nations failed to respond to stop the genocide in Rwanda with military intervention. But in El Salvador, U.N. human rights monitors played an important role in reaching a political settlement and demilitarizing the country after a decade-long civil war. In Somalia, when the country descended into warlord politics, multilateral military forces intervened to save thousands of civilians from starvation. In Cambodia, a massive U.N. peacekeeping operation helped to remove Vietnamese forces and contain the Khmer Rouge, promoting a freely elected government. In Bosnia, the international community, led by the United States, used military force to bring an end to the bloody civil war that had killed some 200,000 people and forced two million others from their homes through systematic “ethnic cleansing.”

Despite the importance of human rights and humanitarian politics, the world community was struggling in the early 2000s to halt vicious, tribal-based strife in the western Darfur province of Sudan. The conflict, characterized as genocide by the United States and many human rights organizations, has taken tens of thousands of lives and forced more than two million people into refugee camps.

African Union Mission troops have been unable to stop the widespread killing and rape, and the United States has urged the United Nations to deploy a large peacekeeping force in the country. At the same time, the international community, including human rights NGOs, has been engaged in responding to the sharp rise in international terrorism highlighted by the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States and by other al Qaeda attacks around the world, from Indonesia to Spain. These same observers have also critiqued the responses to terrorism taken by national governments.

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