

Fundamental freedoms

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Most governments that continue to deprive their citizens of their political and civil rights are today on the defensive, resorting to all kinds of justifications for their failures to respect the international standards of civilized behaviour. One of their recurrent justifications is the development imperative, or as it is usually called, the 'full belly thesis'.

Simply put it says that freedom is a luxury for the starving masses and can only be bestowed upon them once the primary needs of food and health have been fulfilled. Proponents of the 'full belly thesis' would point to the history of the industrial revolution in Europe or to the success of the four Asian dragons to vindicate their stand, insisting on the need to focus the energies of the population towards meeting basic needs. Individual dissent from this collective endeavour should in this vision be rightly quelled.

Many of us reject this vision. Are we then working against development, at least in the eyes of the proponents of the 'full belly thesis'? Do we all have the same understanding of what development is and ought to be?

Amnesty International, with its very precise mandate, does not take a position in the debate. But none of us can ignore one of the central themes of the World Conference on Human Rights, which was precisely the interrelationship between economic, social and cultural rights on the one hand and civil and political rights on the other. Two hands, but one body.

The development discourse has evolved historically in the post-war era to reflect the changes in the international political economy, the shifts in academic theories and the changing ideas and practices of development agencies.

Today most agencies define development as a process combining 'sustainable growth, participation and equity'. But many analysts have argued that in the practice over the past 50 years an invariant has remained: namely national economic growth. Equity was seen as

either trickling down or added as an afterthought, while participation remained restricted to élites.

The startling failure of this model calls for the articulation of a new development discourse. A discourse that will have to be centred on the enhancement of the dignity of human beings and preservation of the earth, our common heritage.

That new development discourse will have first to close the gap between 'talk and action' and be informed by the 'many possible developmental routes' which emerge as the consequences of struggles among different groups in society.

The new discourse should also integrate the contributions of the new social movements such as women, environmentalism and human rights which question the sustainability of just 'any' growth and who call for a worldwide strategy of equality, sustainable growth, and justice.

Finally, this new discourse ought to be based on the concept of 'substantive participation' as the new invariant, thus seeing people as the real and only agents of their development and their history.

As we enter the 21st century the challenge of protecting 'humanity and nature' has become a global one. Today the process of globalization of the world economy is taking a faster pace, as shown by massive international speculations with large foreign investments chasing the best returns and large-scale migrations of people in search of a better life.

In addition, the multiplicity of economic, social and cultural exchanges is reinforcing the sense of belonging to a global community. The wind of democratization has swept away military dictatorships of Latin America, many autocratic regimes in Africa and the communist states of Eastern Europe.

However, or maybe as a result of this process, the attachment of blood, race, religion and ethnicity is growing and in some cases taking a violent form. Global modernization, with its powerful, structural economic and social transformations and loss of identity, is resisted and has revived in many

Freedom from fear and want are threatened both North and South — a woman begs in Red Square, Moscow



The Bolivian government is committed to building a society in which political rights are reinforced through mechanisms of popular participation; economic rights are attained through development and capitalization programmes; and social, as well as cultural rights, are fulfilled through the equitable distribution of education, health, housing and social services. This is a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society where differences in colour, religion or region are a source of unity and not of separation. Sustained development is the best guarantee of human rights for the Bolivian people now, and for future generations.

H.E. Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada
President of Bolivia

Repression combined with the globalization of the world economy leads to large-scale migrations people rescued from the South China sea

places the attachment to an identity opposed to the 'other', leading to exclusion and intolerance. Most ethnic wars in Eastern Europe and Africa, the growth of religious fundamentalism and sectarianism in the Middle East, North America and parts of Asia, the rise of the extreme right in Europe, and mounting racism, antisemitism and xenophobia are proof of the strong attachment to cultural identity which is at times expressed in violent ways.

This double process of globalization and particularization is putting a strain on the legitimacy of the nation-state, already weakened by a global recession it cannot control and the particularistic demands it is unwilling or unable to satisfy. As a result economic and social entitlements and rights are being curtailed more and more and the income gap is widening in many societies, with poverty on the increase both North and South, fuelled by unemployment, homelessness and cuts in social services. Civil and political rights are under special threat, due to the lack of commitment or inability of governments to bring an end to civil wars, to combat mounting social intolerance, religious extremism and racism at home and to promote human rights internationally.

The question for us, therefore, is how are we going to develop the global counter-movement that will protect 'humanity and

nature' from the logic of a global developmental process that may in many countries destroy the very fabric of societies?

For decades, at least since the idea of universal rights was embodied in the Universal Declaration, governments of all ideological persuasions have sought to throw us off track. Under the 'old' world order (the East/West division) the conflict of values, in terms of organization of the economy, of society and of relationships between the individual and the state, appeared to go hand in hand with differing – and often diametrically opposed – notions of what those basic human rights actually were. For governments in the West, the emphasis was on individual freedoms, civil and political rights, natural rights (measured by absolute yardsticks), and international protection. In the Eastern bloc, governments emphasized collective freedoms, economic and social rights, historical rights and national sovereignty. Squeezed between the two blocs, governments of the 'non-aligned South' tried to articulate their own special needs in terms of economic development, and thus their human rights emphasis was on the right to development.

Yet if we go back to the origins of the Universal Declaration, adopted in 1948, these 'conflicting' rights were regarded as not only inextricably linked, but essential to the world order that was to emerge from the slaughter of the First and Second World Wars. Informed by these terrible experiences and by the experience of the New Deal era in the USA, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his address to the Nation in 1941, outlined his four essential freedoms:

'In future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

'The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world.

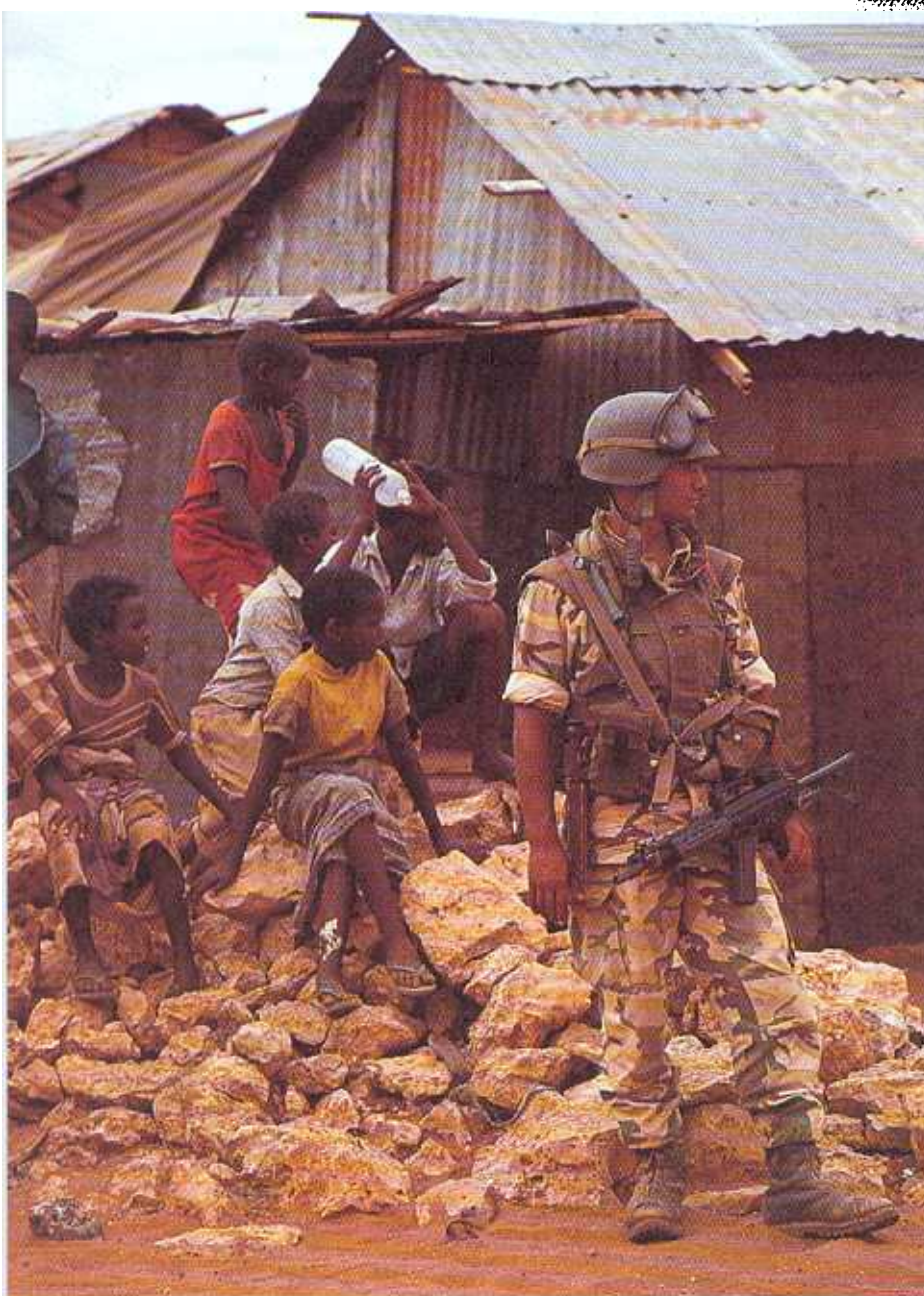
'The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way – everywhere in the world.

'The third is freedom from want - which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peace-time life for its inhabitants – everywhere in the world.

'The fourth is freedom from fear, which translated into world terms means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation would be able to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbour – anywhere in the world.'

This, he said, 'is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a world attainable in our own time and generation.'





The idea of universal rights was embodied in the Universal

Rights and lies behind the work of the UN – Italian UN troops on patrol in Somalia

Roosevelt's vision is an important one. He underlined not only the traditional civil and political rights but also the freedom from want, which has given rise to the concern with economic and social rights.

There followed international treaties and covenants covering everything from civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights to racial and sexual discrimination. Their principles are far-reaching. Even if imperfect, the guidelines for the defence of human rights – all human rights – are in place.

So why are we not celebrating?

Even as the representatives of governments were speaking at the World Conference on Human Rights, mouthing adherence to

universal principles, human rights atrocities were taking place around the world.

In the two weeks of the conference at least four and a half thousand prisoners of conscience in 60 countries continued to languish in jails, prison camps and detention centres. During that time Amnesty International was working on behalf of 11,000 individuals in 80 countries in every region of the world. At least 20 people died under torture, over 40 had 'disappeared' from custody and more than 100 death sentences had been passed.

In development and in human rights, the gap between the rhetoric and the reality is as wide as the gap between the rich and the poor. In that sense, Vienna was a missed opportunity. A missed opportunity to expand the concept of sustainable development; to base it on human needs and human rights and thus reconcile economic development and natural resource preservation with the promotion of and respect for human rights.

But, in a very important respect, Vienna was not the end. It will come to be seen as the beginning of a new and vigorous approach by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to call governments to account and to expose that gap between rhetoric and reality both in the development and human rights discourses.

One of the great successes of the World Conference on Human Rights was the coming together of hundreds of NGOs, and the tremendous feeling of solidarity and determination that touched all of us who attended.

From the point of view of Amnesty International, our starting point and blueprint for real progress is based on two words: 'universality', that is that human rights and obligations apply worldwide, and cannot be watered down in a particular country or region – through bogus arguments about cultural specificity for example; and 'indivisibility', that all rights are vitally important – that the right to development, for example, does not take priority over the right to join a trade union. These are arguments that continue to be used by governments today to justify torture, killings and 'disappearances'.

If development is to result from substantive participation not only have all to be free to join in the debate but, as important, be empowered to contribute.

Alternative ways have to be explored to turn our human duties and obligations into actions that allow peoples of the world to control better their destinies. Empowerment of communities can only be achieved if the spaces of freedom from fear and freedom from want are enlarged at the same time.