

Introduction

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It is natural that the international community should today feel the need to focus on its own values and, reflecting on its history, ask itself what constitutes its innermost identity – in other words, ask questions about humanity and about how, by protecting humanity, it protects itself.

Not a day goes by without scenes of warfare or famine, arbitrary arrest, torture, rape, murder, expulsion, transfers of population, and ‘ethnic cleansing’. Not a day goes by without reports of attacks on the most fundamental freedoms. Not a day goes by without reminders of racism and the crimes it spawns, intolerance and the excesses it breeds, underdevelopment and the ravages it causes!

Let us deal first with the imperative of universality. To be sure, human rights are a product of history. As such, they should be in accordance with history, should evolve simultaneously with history and should give the various peoples and nations a reflection of themselves that they recognize as their own. Yet, the fact that human rights keep pace with the course of history should not change what constitutes their very essence, namely their universality!

Secondly, there is the imperative of guarantees. Every day we see how discredited human rights and the United Nations itself would be, in the eyes of the world, if the declarations, covenants, charters, conventions and treaties that we draft in order to protect human rights remained theoretical or were constantly violated. Human rights should therefore be covered by effective mechanisms and procedures to guarantee and protect them and to provide sanctions.

Lastly, there is the imperative of democratization. In my opinion, this is essentially what is at stake as we approach the end of the century. Only democracy, within States and within the community of States, can truly guarantee human rights. It is through democracy that individual rights and collective rights, the rights of peoples and the rights of persons, are reconciled. It is through democracy that the rights of States and the rights of the community of States are reconciled.

One thing is certain – there can be no sustainable development without promoting democracy and, thus, without respect for human rights.

Only by heightening the international community’s awareness of human rights in this way and involving everyone in this effort can we prevent future violations that our conscience, and the law, will condemn.

*EXTRACT FROM: the opening address of
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