

The social framework: an Arab view

Arab non-governmental organizations

■ The Coordinating Committee of Arab Non-governmental Organizations, in preparation for the World Conference on Human Rights, organized a regional conference on human rights in Cairo in April 1993.

The Conference reviewed the activities of the preparatory process for the World Conference on Human Rights, from the regional and international perspectives, in addition to the efforts of Arab governments and of Arab non-governmental organizations. It also examined the activities of the Preparatory Committee Meetings for the World Conference on Human Rights, being held in Geneva, within the same context. Its review of the international preparatory process as well as that of the Preparatory Committee meetings was very positive. However, it expressed concern at the absence of certain issues from the agenda which are of central importance to the Arab people, particularly the right to self-determination and the illegality of the foreign occupation of land. These represent some of the main issues being discussed in the Arab countries and are of

Different cultures and respect for sovereignty can serve to promote human rights



UNHCR/A. HÖLLMANN

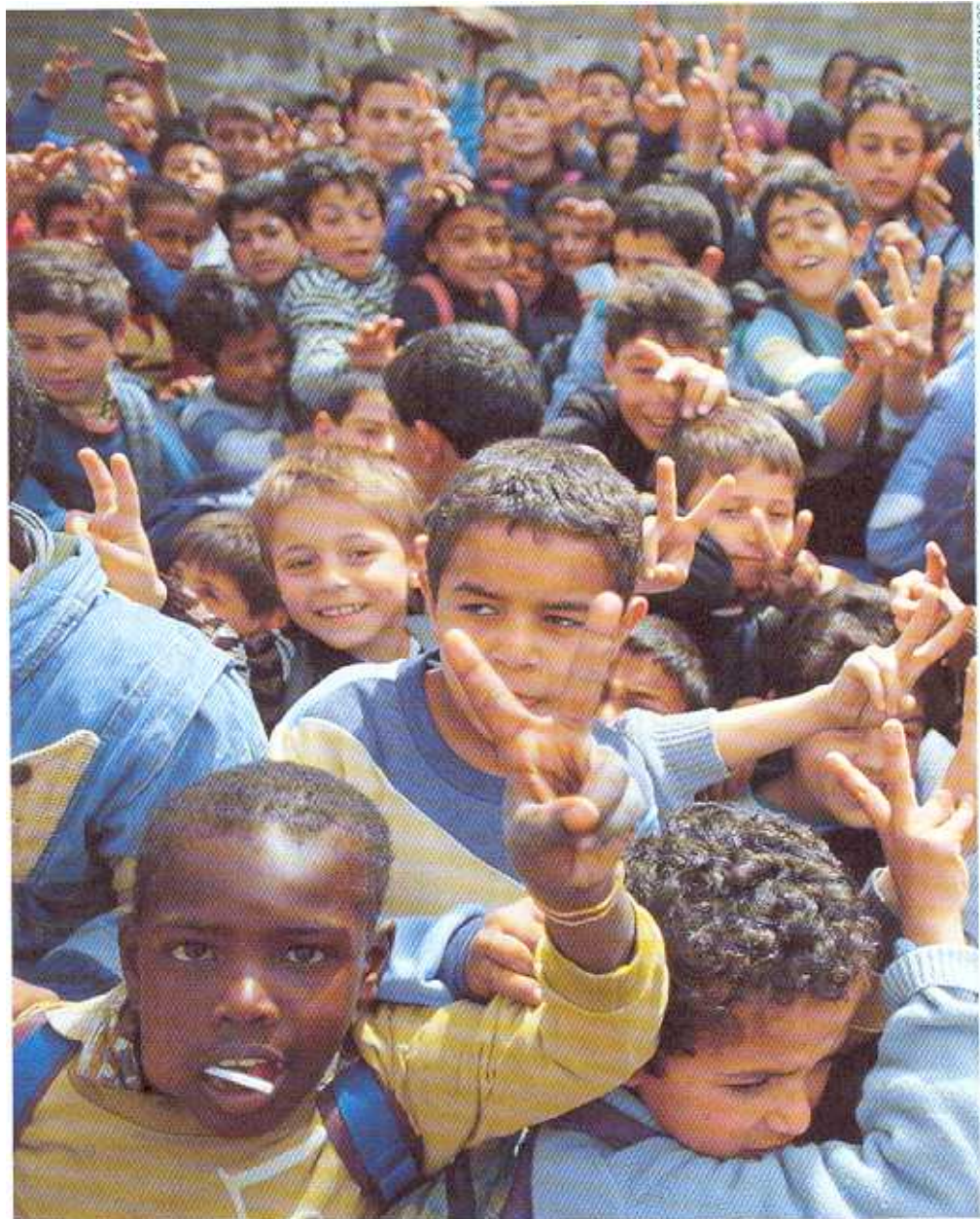
central importance to the human rights cause there, in addition to forming the foundations of the UN in general, and that of its bodies which deal in human rights, in particular.

The Arab Conference on Human Rights also expressed concern at the manner in which the Asian countries stressed the regional particularities of culture and that of national sovereignty in relation to the universal applicability of human rights, as stated in the Declaration issued at the end of the Asia Regional Meeting in Bangkok in preparation for the World Conference on Human Rights. It was noted that several countries have used this 'excuse' to circumvent international scrutiny of their application of various international instruments that deal with basic rights and freedoms. On the other hand, the Conference emphasized its support of the regional particularities of culture and national sovereignty if they serve to promote human rights and increase their respect. However, it opposed such approaches if they were used to negate fundamental human rights or lead to their abrogation. In addition, it stressed the link between civil and political rights, and economic, social and cultural rights, and that between development and democracy and human rights.

The Conference also noted that the obstacles to the promotion and protection of human rights in the region are being reinforced due to the weak relationship that exists between the various legal and constitutional frameworks in the Arab countries and the International Bill of Human Rights. This has also been brought about because of: the practical absence of constitutional and other legal guarantees due to the imposition of emergency measures in some countries of the region; the limitations placed on political freedoms; the weakening of the right of parliamentary, media, and the societies' civil institutions to monitor national developments; the lack of respect for the law and other international instruments; and finally, the continuing discrimination against women in some Arab conventions, and within the social framework in general.

The Arab Conference on Human Rights urged Arab governments to ratify the various international conventions and to eliminate any obstacles preventing their respect in full. It also stressed that special attention be given to the respect and promotion of women and minority rights, including that of national rights. In addition, it underlined the need to place added importance on the respect of the rights of expatriate and other workers, and the resolution of problems relating to prisoners of war, the missing, the disappeared and refugees which

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HOWARD DAVIES/PANOS

The 20th century has brought bewildering changes in all patterns of human life. With the global population expanding and world resources diminishing, local, regional and international conflict shows every sign of increasing. However, the most promising development of the century has been recognition of the interdependence that arises from our mutual interconnections. It is my hope that the Conference will have found success in the spirit of frank and constructive debate and point the way to a viable future for all.

**H.M. King Hussein
I bin Talal**

Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

have resulted from armed conflicts in the area.

In addition, the Conference was dismayed at the apparent dual attitude with which the international community is dealing with the various problems of the area, and particularly its treatment of the Palestinian question. It has been noted that this attitude became clear through inaction of the international community in the face of continued Israeli violation of the UN Security Council resolutions. The Arab Conference called for the provision of legal safeguards for the protection of the Palestinian people, including those provided by the Fourth Geneva Convention, relative to civilians in times of war, and the study of the possibility of creating an international instrument for the purpose of protecting civilians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It also stressed the

right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.

Finally, the Conference discussed ways in which the various international instruments could be reinforced to achieve greater respect and promotion of human rights. Within this context, obstacles to the promotion of the various conventions and covenants were discussed. This also included a detailed examination of the weakness of coordination between the instruments which are already in force, the lack of financial means and the infrequency of the meetings of UN bodies, and the lack of evolution of the UN mechanisms to face the challenges of the changing international system.

EXTRACT FROM: Arab Conference on Human Rights in Preparation for the World Conference, Cairo, April 1993