
On 50th Anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights

By

U.S. Secretary of State, Madeleine K. Albright
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Today, human rights activists and government officials will gather together in New York, Washington, Paris, and elsewhere to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of one of the most significant events of this century. When the world proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948, it announced that freedom and the rule of law, rather than hatred and the rule of force, would serve as our guiding principles.

The Declaration's vision of a world where all people are born "free and equal in dignity and rights" is not yet a reality. Yet I doubt that the drafters of the Declaration could have imagined the progress we have made over the past fifty years. Today, a majority of the world's people live in democracies, and only a few states refuse to recognize the universality of human rights. While they argue that the Declaration should be redrafted, millions demonstrate daily that its principles remain as vital and viable today as the day they were proclaimed.

Although the Declaration does not carry the force or sanction of international law, it is a powerful weapon for freedom. Never has this been more true than in the past ten years. The decade's events have become so much part of our daily routine that it is easy to forget how much we have accomplished in such a short period of time.

Ten years ago, poets, playwrights, workers, and students had not yet come together to bring about a peaceful end to decades of dictatorship in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Most of the countries of East and Central Europe are now democracies, and despite setbacks, political reform is continuing within much of the former Soviet Union.

Ten years ago, Nelson Mandela and Frederick De Klerk had not yet joined forces to bring about a peaceful end to apartheid. Today, a multiracial democracy has replaced the curse of racial separation.

Ten years ago, Asia had only just embarked on what would become a remarkable run of unprecedented peace, prosperity, and growth. Despite recent developments, most Asians are better off today than they were then - in large part because of the expansion of self-government. As Vice President Gore recently noted, democracies can cope with economic crises better than nations where freedom is suppressed.

Ten years ago, democratic reform in Latin America and the Caribbean was just picking up steam. Today in our hemisphere, every country but one has a democratically-elected government.

Throughout the world, those who helped bring about such changes have honored the Declaration's inspiration by incorporating it into their own laws. Today, they will join us in celebrating this document's extraordinary accomplishments. Sadly, however, a foolish few refuse to join the party. The fireworks of Paris will be met with stony silence in Havana, Rangoon and other capitals where dictators delude themselves that persecution is the only response to the truth, that prison is the only solution for peaceful opposition, and that torture and terror are the only guarantors of national unity.

In the United States, we honor the Declaration not just by celebrating its birthday but by embracing its principles. Eleanor Roosevelt, who played a crucial role in the Declaration's drafting, once said that human rights begin "in small places close to home . . . places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without

discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they will have little meaning anywhere." Americans take her admonition very seriously.

Thus our tradition of human rights advocacy in foreign policy is a reflection of our own practices. We seek to promote human rights overseas because we try to uphold them at home. We speak out about abuses, no matter where they occur. But we also establish institutions- like the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission - to investigate and respond to potential human rights abuses inside the United States. We also cooperate with outside investigations - whether by non-governmental organizations like Amnesty International or United Nations Special Rapporteurs - even when we disagree with their premises or their conclusions.

This two-track approach reflects both our commitment to the universality of human rights and our openness as a democratic society. We are proud of our political and judicial systems and welcome any examination. In contrast, the world's dictators deny human rights to their own citizens, persecute those who raise concerns through government channels, and refuse entry to outside investigators.

The Universal Declaration is nothing less than a blueprint for freedom. If its promise is ever to become a reality, each of us must make its principles a part of our own lives. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, "The destiny of human rights is in the hands of all our citizens in all our communities." Live the principles of the Universal Declaration and teach them to our children. Add your voice to that of a human rights organization. Get your church, temple, or mosque active in religious freedom issues. Find out what your union or company is doing to prevent child labor. Only then will our children and grandchildren live in a world where "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."