

Celebrate, calibrate

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IN 1945, the leaders of the victorious allies in World War II created a new liberal world order. The United Nations was founded that year, and in the following year the UN Commission on Human Rights was created. In 1948, the Commission submitted the draft Universal Declaration on Human Rights to the 3rd UN General Assembly. On Dec 10, 1948 the Assembly adopted the declaration.

In 1948, the UN had only 58 member states, in sharp contrast to its current membership of 192. Most of the countries of Asia and Africa had not yet been granted their right of self-determination. They did not participate in the drafting and adoption of the Universal Declaration. Therefore, we cannot claim any parental pride in the Declaration. Should we, Singaporeans, nevertheless join the world in celebrating the Declaration's 60th birthday? And what has it achieved? Does the Declaration have any imperfections? Let me attempt to answer these and other questions.

First, I believe we Singaporeans should join the world in celebrating the 60th birthday of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is because the Declaration has given hope and inspiration to the oppressed and persecuted and has helped to make this a more humane world. Moreover, Singapore subscribes to the principles contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Next, what has the Declaration achieved? Well, it has nurtured a large family of international legal instruments on human rights, as well as many important declarations. The Universal Declaration has also inspired the different regions of the world to advance the cause of human rights at the regional level.

Here in South-east Asia, the Asean Charter, which will come into force on Dec 15, will establish the Asean Human Rights Body. Its terms of reference are currently being drafted by a High-Level Panel, which is making good progress.

The terms of reference, like the Charter, is an enabling document. It will set a broad direction and the Asean Human Rights Body will make progress, in an evolutionary manner, and by learning from practice. The Asean Human Rights Body will also have to take into account the diversity of the Asean family.

Some flaws exist

BUT the Declaration is not without flaws. One possible imperfection is its emphasis on the rights of the individual. Historically, this is understandable because of what happened during World War II and because Asians and Africans had little say in the formulation of the Declaration. A group of elder statesmen of the world, belonging to the InterAction Council, spent 10 years from 1987 formulating a draft Declaration on Human Responsibilities. In 1997, they submitted the document to the UN for its consideration on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration.

But Europe and America were so opposed to the document that they succeeded in blocking its submission to the UN. It was quite extraordinary for Europeans and Americans, who profess to believe in freedom of speech and thought, to have closed ranks to 'silence' the voices of a group of elder statesmen.

The draft Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities contains 19 articles on responsible behaviour. The central argument is that freedom must be balanced by responsibility. Thus, for example, the right to free speech must be balanced by the responsibility to speak truthfully; the freedom of the media to criticise governmental actions must be used with responsibility and discretion; and the freedom of religion must be balanced by the responsibility to avoid expressions of prejudice and acts of discrimination towards those of different beliefs.

Article 15 also enjoins the representatives of religions 'not to incite or legitimise hatred, fanaticism, and religious wars, but should foster tolerance and mutual respect between all people'.

I hope that one day, the UN General Assembly will adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities.

Matching deeds to words

I RECENTLY watched an episode of the CNN programme, Cry Bloody Murder. The episode was on genocide. It began by discussing the massacre of Armenians during World War I and the Holocaust. It then described how, for various political reasons, the West did nothing to protest against Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons against the Kurds in northern Iraq, the failure of the UN Security Council to stop the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda, and the failure by Nato to stop the slaughter of Muslims by the Bosnian Serbs for three years, as well as the failure by the UN to protect the Muslims in the so-called safe haven of Srebrenica, and so on.

I could not help but conclude that on human rights, our deeds often do not match our words. Politics usually trumps principle and interest will trump values.

I was also prompted to think that there is some truth in the cynical statement that the path to hell is often paved with good intention. Let me take you back to earlier this year when Typhoon Nargis hit Myanmar. Initially, Myanmar declined to accept international help. This shocked the world. Some of our Western friends threatened Myanmar with the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect. France and the United States sent humanitarian relief on their warships.

In order to break the impasse, Asean countries offered to bring the supplies to shore, but France and the US refused. In the end, it was at a special meeting of Asean foreign ministers that the group succeeded in persuading Myanmar to accept international help and to agree to let Asean and the UN co-chair a pledging conference in Yangon. Later - again, through gentle persuasion - Myanmar accepted Asean's proposal for a tripartite team, comprising representatives of Asean, the UN and Myanmar, to undertake a comprehensive survey of the devastation and the assistance needed for recovery. This mission was successfully accomplished.

Balanced by responsibility

THERE is no question that we should celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration. It has been a beacon for the oppressed and the persecuted. It has also led to the development of a major corpus of conventions, protocols, charters, declarations to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. The world has become a more humane and civilised home for humanity.

Yet, I believe the West made a mistake when it prevented the UN General Assembly from considering the draft Declaration of Human Responsibilities. Rights and responsibilities are the yin and the yang, the head and tail of the same coin. The world would be a better home if freedom is balanced by responsibility. As a broad generalisation, I would say that in the West, there is too much freedom and not enough responsibility, whereas in the East there is too much responsibility and not enough freedom.

In the real world, no country can have a foreign policy based exclusively on human rights or even on human rights as its first priority. Every country has to balance its commitment to human rights against its other interests. As a result, we cannot expect consistency in any country's human rights policy.

We should also acknowledge that we live in a world of diversity. We have different histories, cultures and values. As a result, we view the same picture and draw different conclusions.

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*The writer is chairman of the **Institute of Policy Studies**. This article is excerpted from a speech given on Wednesday, in which he spoke in his personal capacity.*