

December 10, 2007, 6:33 a.m.

Righting Rights Wrongs

Durban 2009 may provide a unique opportunity for human rights to change course.

By Gerald M. Steinberg

December 10 is International Human Rights Day — marking the anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948. In accepting this document following the unimaginable horrors of the Holocaust, the signatories pledged to protect the “inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.” Like other such anniversaries, the date provides an opportunity to examine the accomplishments, as well as the failures, in implementing this pledge.

The failures are clearly dominant — in much of the world, human rights, including the basic right to life, are given short shrift. The watchdogs, both in the United Nations itself, and in the accompanying network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that claim to promote morality and human rights, have not only failed — they have become a major part of the problem.

The basic norms of human behavior, including the right to life, are violated regularly by oppressive regimes in Burma, Sudan, North Korea, Syria, China (particularly in occupied Tibet), Iran, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere. And yet the representatives of some of these governments also sit on the “reformed” United Nations Human Rights Council. The UNHRC and many similar organizations pay lip service to ethical norms, while applying double standards and closing a blind eye to the massive violations. In 2001, the U.N. held a conference in Durban attended by thousands of delegates, ostensibly to combat racism and xenophobia. Following a preparatory conference in Iran, led by Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson, this exercise became a vehicle for hatred and anti-Semitism.

Many of the hundreds of NGOs that claim to promote and protect human rights are often guilty of aiding and abetting this disgraceful process. Powerful international groups such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch (HRW), the Paris-based FIDH (International Federation of Human Rights), and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) have used the massive resources at their disposal to exploit these norms to pursue private ideological agendas. They participated in the NGO Forum of the 2001 Durban conference, which was even worse than the diplomatic session. The NGO reports consistently focus disproportionately on the United States and Israel, and erase the context of terrorism in order to make false and frequent accusations of “war crimes,” “collective punishment,” “indiscriminate mass killing,” and “violations of

international law.” For example, in 2006, HRW published hundreds of pages attacking Israeli responses to Hizbollah attacks, and glossing over Hezbollah’s aggression and use of human shields. In contrast, this group issued a handful of reports protesting real basic rights violations in Burma, or analyzing the conflict in Sri Lanka.

The “halo effect” enjoyed by the U.N. and NGO human-rights network two or three decades ago has also been eroded by reports which make headlines, but are later shown to be fabricated or unverifiable. Lacking their own research capabilities, groups such as HRW and Amnesty rely on “local eyewitnesses” for evidence in Colombia (FARC), Gaza (Hamas), Lebanon (Hezbollah), and elsewhere. However, there are numerous documented cases in which these “eyewitnesses” are part of the political warfare which exploits the rhetoric of human rights by making false claims. They know that their reports, regardless of the lack of evidence or context, will be used to promote boycotts, demonization, and other political campaigns. In this way, human rights have become a vehicle to promote incitement, hatred, and terror — the antithesis of the objectives proclaimed in 1948.

In order to change this dismal state of affairs, and restore the moral foundation and universality of human rights, the structure of the international diplomatic and NGO mechanisms must be changed, and the leaders must be replaced. The creation of alternative mechanisms to promote human rights, in which membership is limited to democratic governments, and which (without Iran and Sudan) would restore some of this lost legitimacy. Instead of the ineffectual and compromised head of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, new officials willing to stand up to politicized double standards are necessary.

Among the NGO superpowers, Kenneth Roth, who has headed Human Rights Watch since 1993, and Irene Khan, who has controlled Amnesty International since 2001, have been in power for far too long. They are responsible in large part for the politicization of human rights, including the double standards and lack of credibility. The same is true for the leaders of other groups in Europe and elsewhere that claim to promote human rights, and misdirect tens or in some cases hundreds of millions of dollars annually provided for this purpose.

At the same time, in order to restore the lost moral foundation of the human-rights movement, the donors and members of these organizations must also act responsibly to ensure that their support is not abused. It is not enough to simply write a check and come to an annual cocktail party, and declare that they have done their share to promote human rights. Donors to NGOs can be compared to directors of corporations that are accountable for transgressions committed by the officers of their firms. Following the 2001 Durban NGO Forum, the Ford Foundation (under threat of congressional investigation) accepted responsibility for funding some of the most virulent participants, and has implemented guidelines that are designed to prevent a repetition. Some donors to groups such as HRW have cut or conditioned their donations on an end to the double standards, and some members and officials of Amnesty have resigned in protest. These are all steps in the right direction.

In the Spring of 2009, the U.N. Human Rights Council has scheduled a follow up to the infamous Durban conference. This provides a rare opportunity for the governments that actually care about human rights, as well as the NGO community, to reverse course, and demonstrate that the lessons have been learned. If they succeed, this will mark an important step in the restoration of the values embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But if they fail, the Declaration, and the foundation of an international moral code based on a single universal standard, may never recover.

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