

New Trends in Amnesty International's Work

por **D. Pierre Sané**

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Forum Deusto

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Let me start first by thanking the Rector and Dr. Oráa for this kind invitation. It is a great pleasure for me to be here in Bilbao in this historic University, which is lucky to be located in front of another historic monument, the Guggenheim Museum.

What I would like to discuss with you tonight is how Amnesty International is analyzing and understanding the changes in the world, especially since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and their impact on the human rights situation worldwide; and as a result how we have been trying to adjust our strategies to deal with these changes.

This year 1998 will be the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It will be an occasion and an opportunity for people to engage in various debates, conferences and assessments about what has been achieved —what has changed and what has not changed. At the end of the day I am sure that people will not agree on the achievements, because looking at a glass you can see it either half empty or half full.

Changes for the better have occurred over the past 50 years. In the last 50 years we have been witnesses to the end of colonialism, to the

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end of institutionalised racism in the United States, to the end of apartheid. However, in the last 10 years, we have also been witnesses to genocide. Genocide in Rwanda, genocide in Bosnia... We have seen an increase in the number of armed conflicts. The Red Cross has predicted that in the next year or two, the total number of internal conflicts in the world will be 40, which is almost one nation out of 4 or 5 experiencing some form of violent political confrontation.

We have also seen in the past 10 years the rise of religious fundamentalism, the rise of nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and we continue to see impunity in many countries and the increasing use of the death penalty in countries that have retained it.

Whether things have changed or whether things have not fundamentally changed is not just a theoretical debate, it is a reality which confronts us in the human rights movement, which confronts the activists, which confronts Amnesty International. It is a reality that has to do with life and death, because the way we adjust our strategies or not has a significant bearing on the lives of millions of people around the world, and the verdict of relevance for our organisation is ultimately rendered by those who still struggle below the threshold of humanity.

Let us quickly see what is happening in the different regions of the world. Let me take you with me on a quick tour, necessarily incomplete, of what is happening in different regions, things that I have experienced directly, first hand, as I visit different countries, as I meet human rights organisations, as I meet victims and their families and as I meet government representatives.

When I visited Brazil a couple of years ago, I received first hand evidence that the targets of state repression in Brazil and in many countries in Latin America have changed. They have shifted from the political opponent to the masses of the poor and the disadvantaged in society. In Latin America, political pluralism has prevailed over the military dictatorship, but social justice remains as elusive as ever. There is today a consensus among the elites in the military, business and politics around the neo-liberal economic model, around formal democracy and around human rights rhetoric. But there is also another more sinister consensus in Latin America, which is around the legitimacy of the use of state violence against those who are excluded from the model. But in order to protect the veneer of state respectability, more and more the «dirty job» in Latin America is done by death squads, which allow the state to keep a distance from the human right

violations. And the human right defenders, those who expose and tear apart this veneer of respectability, have become targets of state repression.

Or take South Africa, a country that I visit regularly. From the end of apartheid, from the coming into being of the new South Africa, we have had a disagreement with the new government, a disagreement on the issue of impunity for the former perpetrators. In our stand against impunity, we attracted accusations of «endangering the miracle of reconciliation». Now, in Africa, internal conflicts remain the dominant context in which massive human right violations are committed or are swept under the carpet in the name of post war reconciliation.

Increasingly today in Africa, conflicts are conveniently attributed to «irreconcilable ethnic differences». Atrocities that are committed by the combatants are in turn deemed inevitable due to so-called «stock of ancestral hatred», which allows governments and foreign powers to evade their obligations in the field of human right protection. Claiming that they are faced with «the intractable problem of ethnicity» allows them further to forego their responsibilities by de-linking conflicts from the failures of an imposed development model, which prompts them finally to push for quick fix peace settlements, burying the past and resuming business as usual. From Shell to the World Bank; from the African governments to the armed opposition groups; from the foreign powers to the United Nations, our goal in Africa is to impose accountability on all actors and bring an end to impunity.

Two years ago I visited Israel and the Palestinian Authority. On both sides I was confronted with strikingly similar arguments. In short, to save the peace process human rights had to be sent «on holiday». Hence, Israel was about to legalise torture —hiding behind the spurious argument of the «ticking bomb». Since then, Israel has legalised torture and is the first country ever to have done so. Yasser Arafat demonized the few Palestinian human right defenders, labelling them «enemies of the peace process», because they were exposing the human right violations committed by the Palestinian police forces. On both sides without much public outcry. On both sides with the tacit support of the international community. In the Middle East the brutal politics of the region have not been conducive to building a human right culture. A significant component of our strategy there will include human right education and public debates.

Or take China or Indonesia. The lure of hefty profits in the new Eldorado of capitalism is silencing moral obligations everywhere. Economic growth has boosted the self-confidence of many Asian governments, prompting challenges to universal values and to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Hopefully, the crisis in that region of the world will bring more humility. In Asia, our work includes defending the universal values which underpin the UN Charter which governments themselves, including those of Asia, have enacted.

Or take the United States of America. I went to Atlanta during the Olympics when 11,000 athletes of all races were competing under the banner of the Olympic ideals of «brotherhood and fair play». All those athletes were hosted by the state of Georgia, which has a long history of racist violence against the black population. Between 1880 and 1930, 3,220 blacks were lynched by mobs in the southern states of the United States. Today, lynching has been replaced by electrocution and lethal injection, and the state has taken over from the mobs the role of the executioner. But the sentence of death continues to be applied in ways that are racist, arbitrary and unfair. As I speak, the state of Florida is resuming executions after a one year suspension. The suspension was because when they executed a prisoner last year on the electric chair, the prisoner was burnt to death because the electric chair did not work very well. The state of Florida executed again yesterday. This week they are planning to execute three more people and, among those, there is one woman that is likely to be executed. She will be the first woman to be executed in Florida since 1848 and the second to be executed in the United States this year.

Throughout the western world the politics of exclusion, racism and xenophobia puts minorities, migrants and refugees at a growing risk of being stripped of their humanity and of their rights, and in Europe and in the USA vigilants more than ever remains the order of the day. We should always keep in mind that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights came in response to the cries of the millions of the victims slaughtered in the concentration camps of Germany, right in the middle of Europe, or annihilated by the American nuclear bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Yes, the reality of human right work is changing but the reality is as ever shaped by greed, political expediency, social injustice and brutality.

The Berlin Wall has been brought down, sweeping away repression in the name of containing communism here or advancing communism

there, but in its wake, old and new walls are mounting within nations and between regions. When the Berlin Wall came down, Amnesty International said: «There are still many walls; let us not forget them».

Let me suggest four of them.

First, the wall of *poverty*: according to the UNDP more than one third of the world population lives in absolute poverty and every day 35.000 children die of malnutrition and preventable diseases. On the other hand, wealth is being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. A global dividing wall is cutting across societies and regions posing dangerous threats to our future.

Second, the wall of *intolerance*: the vacuum created by the collapse of the socialist alternative is being filled by 19th century ideologies and a return to religious, ethnic and nationalist fundamentalisms. Simplistic solutions to complex problems are offered, scapegoats and new enemies are identified, bright futures are promised. Racism, xenophobia and religious intolerance are generating violent conflicts and erecting a wall of fear and insecurity for the «Other».

Third, the wall of *indifference*: as the TV screens world wide bring daily their dose of atrocities, whole generations grow accustomed to the plight of the victim, to the ineffectiveness of the so called «international community» to contain the massive violations of Human Rights broadcasted in full technicolour in front of our very eyes. Slowly many accept that nothing is being done, many agree that nothing can be done, and some even profess that nothing should be done.

Fourth, the wall of *hypocrisy*: more than ever before, governments throughout the world are proclaiming their attachment to the principles of international cooperation to eradicate the scourges of poverty and violations of the dignity of human beings. They all promise to protect the earth our common heritage and to guarantee peace and prosperity for all. World conference after world conference the same promises are made. But the gap between rhetoric and reality is as big as the gap between rich and poor. Everywhere narrow economic and strategic interests take precedence over principles and promises. Human Rights bureaucracies proliferate to protect a country's image but are impotent to stem the tide of massive Human Rights violations.

Right now there is a debate in Spain regarding the jurisdiction of the Spanish courts over the crimes committed in Chile and in Argentina during the years of military rule. Amnesty International's

position and answer is yes. Amnesty International fully supports the initiatives taken by the two judges, based on international human rights law. The crimes committed in Chile and Argentina were massive and systematic. Nine thousand people «disappeared» in Argentina. At least three thousand people in Chile «disappeared», were killed or died under torture. Those were crimes against humanity and crimes against humanity are imprescriptible. They cannot be amnestied by Parliament.

Crimes against humanity can be prosecuted under universal jurisdiction. Any country can initiate legal action and prosecute perpetrators of these crimes, irrespective of where the crimes occurred and irrespective of who the perpetrator was. We applaud the initiative taken in Spain. We have applauded similar initiatives taken in France and in Italy, and hope that as these initiatives evolve in response to a sentiment in public opinion, perpetrators of human right violations will understand that they will have no place to hide. This is one of the best ways to prevent crimes against humanity and further genocide.

Now these are some priority areas in which Amnesty International is working. What we really want to do is to bring down all these walls—bring them down in order to assert the humanity of all while celebrating and valuing our differences.

In order to achieve these we need to win a few challenges.

When Human Rights violations occur on such a massive scale the challenge for Amnesty International is to maintain the focus on the individual victim. This we do by preserving the identities of each these victim. This we do by preserving the identities of each of these victims behind these global walls, by naming them. by providing the stories of their lives. The horror of the numbers should not obliterate the humanity of each individual. We need to win the challenge of *humanity*.

The challenge is further to continue to point to responsibility and to demand individual accountability. In spite of the systems and structures that condition Human Rights situation individuals have taken decisions, other individuals have carried out orders. They need to be brought to justice wherever they are. We need to win the challenge of *impunity*.

The challenge also is to win and maintain the compassion and solidarity of individuals worldwide. We should not allow good society to be dehumanized by failing to feel and act to preserve the dignity

and lives of fellow human beings. We need to continue to persist relentlessly that change is possible through the collective of individuals taking action. «L'Homme est el remede de l'homme» says an African proverb. What man does, man can undo. We need to win the challenge of *compassion*.

What we want to give to our members is a message of relevance, of hope and solidarity. And it is that we can create an image as compelling as the POC to address today's violations. That image is the Human Rights Defender. She is on the front line defending the weak, demanding redress, prosecuting the violators, organizing the workers or the landless peasants, bridging the gap between the Hutus and Tutsis. She is the target of state security, of the paramilitaries, of the extremists. With our help and protection she can bring a Human Rights order to her country. We need to win the challenge of *action*.

Concurrently we need to engage the battle about values. The dominant value today is money. You have it or you struggle for it. It is becoming the yardstick to measure one's worth and which side of the wall you belong to. The economic imperative takes precedence over the social needs and is sidelining the political sphere.

«Free the markets, deregulate, privatize, roll back the state and globally we shall all prosper.» What is now «la pensee unique» is quick to stigmatize any advocacy of alternative values as «ideological, irrealist or at best idealist». International financial institutions, universities, foundations, big medias, politicians keep on repeating this same gospel further deepening the moral vacuum. The danger of course is that this moral vacuum is being filled by a recourse to old totalitarianisms: religious fundamentalism, nationalism, xenophobia, the old ties of blood, or of cultural relativism.

For us in the Human Rights struggle it is imperative to reassert the universality of tolerance and solidarity, the universality of all Human Rights for all. That freedom from fear and freedom from want come first, that the resources and political will of this world should be directed at the protection of fundamental freedoms and satisfaction of basic rights. We need to win the challenge about *values*.

Many commentators have said that Amnesty was a dream. When you dream alone, yes, it is a dream, but when you dream with millions of others, it is the beginning of reality, and that is the reality that we want to see. We want to see a reality where the rights of all will be respected. And we have the basic direction: the Universal Declaration

of Human Rights. The only thing we have to do now is to keep on walking in that direction, and to be, in the words of Gandhi «the change that we want to see in the world». We ourselves have to be that change.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

Resumen

La ponencia expone la situación de los Derechos Humanos en el mundo y los pasos que se han dado en la defensa de éstos en los últimos años. Existen varios muros detrás de los cuales se violan sistemáticamente los Derechos Humanos, tales como la pobreza, la intolerancia, la indiferencia y la hipocresía y, a pesar de los grandes avances que se han realizado en materia de defensa de los Derechos Humanos, la violación de los mismos continúa sin combatirse y hoy, más que nunca, es una empresa inacabada.

El período comprendido entre finales de los 80 y principios de los 90 ha sido el «peor de todos los tiempos» para los Derechos Humanos. Aparte de las guerras se han producido situaciones de masiva violación que requieren la atención de Amnistía Internacional. Entre ellas, se citan las violaciones de los Derechos Humanos contra los pobres y desprotegidos y contra los derechos de las mujeres, así como la continua agresión a los derechos elementales por parte de los gobiernos autoritarios.

Respecto al primer caso, cabe denunciar el ejercicio de poder arbitrario que se sigue contra la «gente humilde» en cientos de países. Sólo la puesta en marcha de unos instrumentos que pongan fin a la pasividad, complicidad y no resistencia hacia los abusos en los Derechos Humanos de los pobres, logrará la universalidad de los Derechos Humanos. En esta época de masiva violación de los Derechos Humanos, las organizaciones deberían unir sus manos para avanzar hacia mecanismos de control y obligaciones en asuntos relacionados con la economía, cultura y derechos sociales, presionando para que existan cláusulas sobre Derechos Humanos en los acuerdos y tratados firmados por los países de las Naciones Unidas, incluyendo el Banco Mundial, el Fondo Monetario Internacional, el Alto Comisionado para las Naciones Unidas, etc.

Por otro lado y en relación con la persistencia en muchos países de leyes autoritarias que violan los Derechos Humanos a escala masiva, se-

ñalar que todavía existen cientos de prisioneros con sentencias de muerte y miles de ejecutados cada año en numerosos países como China, Irán y Arabia Saudí, y a pesar de que estos gobiernos continúan usando y abusando de argumentos culturales para justificar sus crímenes, la presión internacional se mantiene pasiva guiada por intereses económicos y objetivos estratégicos.

Respecto a las violaciones de los Derechos Humanos de las mujeres, el abuso de las mujeres es endémico en todas las culturas y países, y si queremos dirigir proyectos tendentes hacia la dignidad y defensa de los derechos básicos de las mujeres, el punto de arranque sólo puede ser la realidad de las condiciones de éstas y no el concepto dominante de Derechos Humanos.

Para el futuro inmediato, Amnistía Internacional quiere concentrar sus energías en ciertas áreas prioritarias, en reducir las barreras y en preservar la humanidad de todos los ciudadanos. Para lograr estos objetivos, la asociación se ha fijado unas metas tendentes a vencer los desafíos de humanismo, impunidad, compasión, acción y el reto de los valores. Sólo con acciones colectivas enraizadas en los valores defendidos por la ONU, se podrán destruir las barreras existentes, siempre y cuando se entienda que la globalización sólo procede con la universalidad de los Derechos Humanos y que la democracia está firmemente arraigada en la justicia social.

