

Reaffirming our faith in human dignity and worth:

60th anniversary of Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP, Prime Minister of Britain, 10 December 2008

Can I say first of all what a great privilege it is for me to be here at this excellent event organised by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, all of us coming together - just as, in countries all round the world today, people are coming together - to celebrate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to reaffirm with us our faith in fundamental human dignity and worth. And it may seem a long time away from Paris in 1948 where the Universal Declaration was signed to London, Lancaster House today in 2008, but we are actually meeting in the place where in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the colonial movements and independence agreements were actually signed by negotiations in Kenya, Ghana and then Zimbabwe to create freedom from colonial oppression. And so this is a place which has seen many of the human rights that we value greatly being upheld by agreements for independence and majority governance in some parts of the world.

When the declaration was written 60 years ago Britain was of course a very different place, but there are some things that do stand the test of time. The values of 1948 - that powerful post-war impulse for liberty, for justice, for fairness - continues not only to endure but to flourish to this day. And I have spoken often of the great ideals which powered the Declaration and of course the new institutions that were created in that period after the Second World War when people tried to rebuild out of the Holocaust, out of the horrors of war, out of the atomic bomb, institutions that would be conceived in the same spirit of optimism and hope for a world where everyone would, as the Declaration says, be equal in dignity and rights - and that is, of course, what inspired the Universal Declaration.

But what a powerful declaration it is. It is a mid-20th century landmark on the long road to liberty, democracy and justice; the first global affirmation of the rights I passionately believe all human beings are born with. And today - and deservedly - the Declaration has the distinction of being the most widely translated document ever in the world, but of course it is much more than simply words: it is a thread that is woven deep into the fabric of our daily lives. To many the author of the Declaration, Eleanor Roosevelt's quote is "where after all do Universal Human Rights begin? They begin in small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map": communities, offices, factories, homes and schools, and that is what Trevor was talking about with the investigation that he is leading into human rights in our country today.

Now when times are tough, as they are, and when people in those homes and offices and factories are feeling anxious, vulnerable and insecure, rights and responsibilities and the principles of liberty and fairness that they uphold remain as resonant and relevant as ever they have been. And it is worth recalling that the four freedoms set out by President Roosevelt in 1941 - freedom of expression, freedom to worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear - became the freedoms on which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is based. And just as in 1941 when people were facing difficulties, they wrote a Declaration of Freedom, so too in 1948, after the Second World War, a similar Declaration was written and today it is what we all look to in every part of the world, we look to it for inspiration.

Now as our freedoms are attacked and they have been in Mumbai and in different parts of the world by terrorists across the world, we do stand shoulder to shoulder against those who would threaten our security and in some cases even threaten our existence. But we stand solid too in defence of and in advancing our values and our democratic way

of life - "the very antithesis of the order of tyranny that is created", as Roosevelt himself said, "with the crash of a bomb". For freedom, if it means anything, means "the supremacy of human rights everywhere" - and we must not waver in our support for those across the world whose human rights are threatened or denied: in societies where mindless acts of terrorism seek to destabilise a peaceful way of life, where freedom of speech and of press are stifled, where religious persecution is rife and the rights of women violated.

Perhaps the most poignant story that I have read in the last few years is a story of a young boy called David. He was a Ugandan, and he was caught up in the massacres in Rwanda. At the age of 10 he and his mother were killed by murderous people and if you go to the museum that commemorates the holocaust in Rwanda you see the photograph of David, and then you see the facts surrounding his existence: age, 10; his favourite pastime, playing football; his ambition, to be a doctor; and then his last words - and these were words I understand that he said to his mother - don't worry, the United Nations are coming to save us. But they never did - and that is why we must remember our responsibilities to everyone who faces persecution, difficulties and discrimination around the world.

Now only last Monday, at a specially convened session, the UN Human rights Council condemned sexual violence in the eastern Congo where rape is being used as a systematic weapon of war to torture and humiliate women and girls, where children are used as fighters by armed militias, and where families and communities are being ripped apart.

In Zimbabwe we are witnessing a humanitarian emergency of colossal proportions, thousands now stricken with cholera. They need help urgently and our disagreement with Mugabe will not stand in our way. So we are increasing our humanitarian aid and calling on others to do the same, for we must stand together to meet our moral obligations to the people of Zimbabwe who have shown such forbearance and such fortitude, whilst saying firmly to the Mugabe regime that enough is enough.

Now European countries came together on Monday of this week to expand our sanctions against Mugabe's bloodstained regime, freezing the assets and preventing the travel of their henchmen. And my conversation with Ban Ki-Moon, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, last night led us to believe that we can have a meeting of the Security Council next week on Monday to discuss what further measures the international community can take, and this is where we can make a difference in defending and advancing human rights in difficult circumstances.

In Burma, over the last month, more than 200 people have been sentenced to some of the longest and harshest prison sentences ever meted out, simply for promoting basic human freedoms. So with Ban Ki-Moon, the United Nations and our international partners we will continue to work for the release of Aung San Su-Ki and more than 2,000 political prisoners so that we can begin the painful process of reconciliation and force the government of that country into recognising the need to uphold human and democratic rights.

In Darfur, millions of men, women and children continue to start each day with the fear of violence, abduction, rape or death. Already 200,000 people have lost their lives, almost 3 million people have been displaced, and almost 5 million - that is two-thirds of the population - have been affected. So more than five years after the fighting began it is time for the world to come together once again to tell all sides in the conflict that it must end now.

And then in Afghanistan a broad international coalition, united by our common values, is supporting the democratic government of Afghanistan in a steady attempt, slow but steady, to establish a peaceful and more prosperous future whilst facing down an insurgency rooted in a vicious combination of terrorism, religious extremism and ruthless drug lords.

So today on this great anniversary I say to the women and girls of Kivu, to the stricken people of Zimbabwe, to the political prisoners of Burma, to the children of Darfur who have known nothing in their lives but war, and to all those who struggle throughout the world for human rights: the world will not abandon you. We must not, and we will not turn our backs and walk away.

Now in a country like Britain with a strong tradition of democracy, it is all too easy to take our rights for granted, but we should never forget that the universal rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration and in our Human Rights Act are a shield and a safeguard for us all. Some of those rights - the prohibition against torture, for example - are absolute. But the Declaration also enjoins us to act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood - so, for example, everyone has the right of freedom of expression but it is unacceptable to use that right in a way that legitimises the incitement of hatred or violence towards others.

So living together in our society we owe obligations to each other - not only the legal obligations to obey the law and pay our taxes, but wider obligations such as respecting each other's choices and beliefs in order to create a responsive society that is civilised and decent. I was talking earlier, a few minutes ago, to some of the young people who are working to become and are equality leaders in their communities. They were fantastically passionate, they are committed to the work they do and I believe we need to do more, and they certainly told me we need to do more, to ensure that voices such as theirs are heard and to encourage young people like them to get involved in political activity. And I can think of no better way of ensuring that the values of the Universal Declaration are as cherished for the next 60 years as they have been for the last.

Nelson Mandela, 10 years ago, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, said that the challenge for the future of the Universal Declaration is whether humanity, and especially those who occupy positions of leadership, will have the courage to build a world consistent with the rights set out in 1948 - and that was the same year, of course, that the rights of so many, Nelson Mandela among them, in South Africa were curtailed so violently with the advent of apartheid in that country.

But what finer testament to courage and to the triumph of the human spirit could there be? That great statesman, who endured the worst but never ceased to believe in and uphold the best, is quite simply one of the 20th century's staunchest defenders of human rights, the personification of everything that was in the minds of those who drafted the Declaration back in 1948. And I believe we owe it to him and all those who have relied on the Universal Declaration and benefited from it over the years to uphold that proud tradition, not just for the sake of those who suffer today, but on into the 21st century to ensure the rights and freedoms of generations still to come.

They say that President Truman, who was President of the United States in the 1940s when the Declaration was signed, kept two signs on his desk. The first everybody remembers from tales that have been told of the past. The first was "the buck stops here", and we know something about that for leaders. The other one, however, quoted Mark Twain, so there was a second on his desk and it said "Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest". And I think today it is for us as a generation to do right, to meet our moral obligations, to stand up for the values we believe in, to

stand up and be heard in Zimbabwe, in the DRC, in Burma, in Darfur and all across the world where injustice, poverty and inequality exists. There can be no excuse for lethargy, no excuse for inaction. 60 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed, the buck really does stop with us, but we must go on to do always, as Truman said, what is right.

I thank you for everything you are doing to promote human rights and I believe that together we can begin to make a better world.