

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT A COMMON FUTURE

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There are two paradoxes in today's topic. The first pertains to human rights. It is really a paradox to talk about human rights in a human society. Who is claiming rights from whom? The second is concerned with the environment. Although humanity is a natural extension, in fact an integral part of nature, we have not given the environment due consideration. On the contrary, in many cases the environment has been subjected to the most cruel treatment.

If, according to the ancient Romans, *Homo Homini Lupus Est*, in the case of the environment, it could be said that humans are the murderers of the environment and therefore of themselves, in the long run committing suicide.

Humans can live without other people and can even destroy each other. However, in the case of the environment there are situations where a problem can cause world destruction. Although humans, when threatened, react, talk, shout, cry etc., the environment suffers without obvious reaction, although in its own silent way it warns and sometimes punishes silently, secretly.

I do not need, in the presence of such a distinguished and well informed audience, to elaborate on the tragic state of both human rights and of the environment in some parts of the world, or to point out that while mass violations of human rights can even go unnoticed by, and without grave repercussions from, the rest of the world, violations of the rights of the environment can, in certain cases, provoke the destruction of the planet itself.

Of course, there is another dimension, in which a phenomenon from outer space, such as a cosmic event, can cause the earth's destruction. This raises the great philosophical question; is humankind really free and independent, or is humanity merely a victim of the supernatural, unknown forces of the universe? We do not live and act in a vacuum; we are absolutely dependent, directly or indirectly, on our natural environment. There is a balance between the two and when it is violated by either party, the result is destruction and suffering. Of course humankind, than whom there is nothing more awe-inspiring, as ancient Greeks used to say, is usually - at least after the technological revolution and the nuclear explosion - the one responsible for the unbalanced relations. The Romans used to say *Tempus Edax Homo Edakior* - time is all-devouring but humankind remains stupid. However, it would be unjust to accuse humanity in general. The reason for unbalancing the human-environmental equilibrium should be sought, apart from, distorted human nature, in the organised exploitation and abuse of natural resources, especially in the arms race, and more particularly in the nuclear race. This has been greatly responsible for destroying the harmonious relationships between humankind and the environment.

In the domain of human rights, the international community, within the framework of the UN, has made some progress in many areas, especially theoretically and institutionally, but in practice, it has not yet achieved very satisfactory results. Although it has adopted very significant instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the two Covenants on Human Rights, and other very important instruments concerning racial discrimination, sex discrimination, minorities, refugees, etc., in practice there is much left to be done, because of the unwillingness of countries or governments to respect and promote human rights. However, there have been two important landmarks in the process of promoting these rights within the UN framework during the last few years which must be noted. The first is the diplomatic and political intervention of the UN in cases of mass violation of human rights or even its coercive actions, including military intervention, e.g. Albania, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia; and the second is the broadening of the role of the UN peace-keeping forces to include other areas such as human rights. Furthermore, the Vienna Conference on Human Rights gave a new impetus to the promotion of human rights.

Following the end of the Cold War and the fall of totalitarian regimes, the democratisation process has opened the way for the improvement of human rights. However, various countries and governments, under the guise of Article 2 of the UN Charter, which prohibits intervention in the domestic affairs of a country, continue these violations. Serious abuses and non-accountable activities continue, concerning human rights. Unfortunately, in this domain too, international society has followed an "ostrich" policy. Millions of people are still without a country, or under foreign occupation and in some cases genocide is even being committed, while the international community remains indifferent or even connives. At the same time factors such as crime, narcotics, contagious diseases etc., have added to the vicious circle.

In the domain of the environment, the international community has also followed the "ostrich" policy. The lack of international discipline has led to serious abuse of and non-accountable activities against, the environment, which in many areas remains, itself without even theoretical institutional protection. Concerning human rights, the international community has adopted many important instruments with regard to the rights of the environment, which should be included within the broader framework of human rights; the international community has demonstrated negligence, carelessness and lack of regard.

Only in the 1970's did the international community begin to realise the dramatic state of the environment and, within the framework of the UN, to take the first measures. There have been various covenants and other instruments which protect the environment, but so far there has not been a universal instrument such as that concerning human rights. So far there is no Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Environment, and why not of the Rights of the Universe? Moreover, human activities, particularly the organised exploitation of natural resources, have reached the extent of anarchy and, in certain cases, border on genocide against nature, as for example in Brazil. The efforts and activities within the context of the UN, concerning effective protection of the environment, vacillate because of lack of political will on the part of the international community. The political, economic or strategic cost hinders consensus and effective action. For instance, the UN succeeded in bringing together hundreds of representatives of governments in Rio de Janeiro for the Conference on Environment and Development. Although hopes were created, again, conflicting interests among States obstructed a fruitful outcome.

In our region, while there have been some positive results concerning the protection of the Mediterranean from pollution, and various instruments have been adopted, the lack of political will on the part of member States has hindered the common endeavour for an optimum result. Unless we succeed in achieving complete harmony between human rights and those of the environment, we are doomed to misery.

Modern society, despite its technological progress, and probably to some degree because of it, has lost its natural orientation; has been lured by the lust for power and riches into a vicious circle of open antagonism and "profit-mania," ending up, to use a simile, in an undertaker's funeral parlour. Here, like the owners themselves, it profits from the death of others, under the illusion that only they will die and never itself.

So, finally, let us dare to tell the truth, let us not excuse our indifference, our ignorance, our complicities in the continuous crime against humanity and the environment. The famous Lebanese poet Kahil Gibran wrote in *The Prophet*: "As a single leaf turns not yellow but with the silent knowledge of the whole tree, so the wrong doer cannot do wrong without the hidden will of all."

Let us then be honest and face the truth because in the final analysis it is not the hole in the ozone layer that threatens the world but, the hole in the human conscience. It is the depletion of human conscience that causes and perpetuates the human tragedy in terms of human rights and the environment. The famous Greek poet, Nikiforos Vrettakos, said that before the environment was polluted, something else was, insinuating the human mind.

So, let us revolt peacefully and create the prerequisites for addressing the problems of human rights and the rights of nature. For this, first and foremost, the political will of all governments is needed - and here the scientists, the intellectuals, have the first word - to draw up a comprehensive plan encompassing all human activities, from armaments, population growth, development, minorities, refugees and all those domains where problems exist which hinder progress, and to offer solutions. Real peace does not mean merely absence of war, but absence of all those reasons which cause war. And if we cannot achieve peace and harmony with ourselves as human beings and with our natural environment, then the future, if there is going to be any future at all, will be dark.

The UN and its affiliated organisations can offer the solution to all human problems, as long as there is political will among member governments. This initiative should start from the most powerful, politically and economically speaking. Our planet can be a happy place for all, if we all decide to make it one.

In his message on the occasion of Earth Day '94, UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, said:

"The message of Earth-Day is twofold: First, we are all members of a global community. Membership to that community entails responsibilities, as well as rights. Each member of the community has the right to fulfil his or her potential. But, as in a family, we cannot act without regard to the rights of others, or to the collective responsibilities of the community as a whole. Second, human beings do not stand alone on this planet. Freedom for human beings, which does not take account of other living beings, is, in the long term, a delusion. When species are lost and habitats destroyed, the repercussions for life as a whole, both now and for the generations to come, are incalculable. We need to be more aware of the effects of individuals and groups on the environment. We need more reverence for the natural world around us. All life on this planet is part of a unified entity. We are all a part of it. Let Earth Day, with its theme, 'One Earth, One Family,' become a vehicle for establishing a universal concord for all living beings, for establishing peace and for nurturing our environmental heritage."

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