

Good afternoon all,

On behalf of Amnesty International, I would like to welcome you to this human rights walk, organised by our activist groups in Ghent and Amsab Institute of Social History. The occasion for this walk is 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Other speakers will elaborate on the content and impact of the Declaration, but I want to stick to the very first sentence of the first article of the UDHR: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." And more specifically the first word, all. That word points to an essential characteristic and also an essential strength of human rights: universality. It is not just "the Declaration of Human Rights," no, it is the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights". That human rights are there for all human beings is essential. Every human being has the right to be human, anywhere, anytime, no matter who they are. Every human being has the right to freedom, equality and justice.

That universality has often raised questions over the past 75 years and still raises many questions today, perhaps more than ever. Let me briefly mention a few points.

First, with this universality often comes the criticism that human rights "are a Western concept after all." My answer to that criticism is: to some extent yes, but mostly no. The Universal Declaration is Western in its form and language, as a document with preamble and articles adopted by a at that time a small club of countries. But the answer is most of all "no, human rights are not a purely Western concept." There are many arguments for that, formal ones, such as the fact that to become a member of the United Nations you have to accept the Declaration, and also less formal ones, such as the fact that over time, regions and cultures - sometimes much earlier than in the so-called West - the values behind the articles of the Declaration are part of all humanity. Values like justice, equality and freedom do not belong to any specific time or hemisphere. Finally, the accusation that human rights are "Western" is something you often hear from perpetrators of human rights violations, but I have never heard it from a victim of human rights violations.

The second thing I want to say about universality is that we should not confuse universality with uniformity. The human rights framework may lay out fundamental rights, but the way in which they are realized may, and indeed should, have great diversity according to place, time, culture, and so on. To make it clear with a simple example: human rights establish the right to education, but do not prescribe what kind of education that should be: secular, religious, home teaching, you name it. This diversity of interpretation of human rights is a strength and at the same time makes the work never finished and human rights realization an ongoing social exercise.

Third, what for me today is one of the greatest threats to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the entire human rights framework is the divisive political discourse being wielded, from the local to the global level. Examples abound, pitting 'us' - often a majority group being played for the sake of political gain - against 'them' - often a minority group or people who are 'different' in terms of origin, gender, social background and you name it. The 'us' group may have rights, but the 'them' group no longer does; they are dehumanized and therefore not entitled to human rights. Human rights do not tolerate such an 'us versus them'. Human rights are not compatible with a divisive discourse. When we start dividing people into categories of those who have rights and those who have fewer or no rights, we erode the heart of human rights.

Finally, in addition to us/them thinking, employing human rights with double standards is also a frontal attack on the universality of human rights. Human rights for all are obviously not a description of current reality - they never have been - but they are a program for a common, human future for all.

When people in power apply double standards, in other words care about human rights in one case and not in another, it undermines the universality of human rights and the very substance of the whole concept is compromised. Think of the civilian victims in Gaza and Israel, think of the many thousands who are victims of horrific violence in Sudan, think of the prisoners of conscience who remain detained in the United Arab Emirates while the world turns a blind eye. I could unfortunately give many dozens of examples.

Being consistent and persistent is one of the things we need most today. Unfortunately, the reality around us seems to go the other way.

Against that background, the question arises, including perhaps during this walk, "how can we remain optimistic about human rights?" To be honest: I am not optimistic, but I am - most of the time anyway - hopeful. And I like to quote American writer Eric Liu "Being optimistic is assuming that everything will work out. Being hopeful is realizing that things can work out if we make the effort. Hope requires responsibility and taking action; optimism absolves us of both."

So we need not be optimistic, but let us inspire each other to remain hopeful.

I wish you all a nice walk.

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