

Tuesday 27th July, 1993

THE ISLAND

# Ensuring integral human rights

**A** heated international debate was on in June at the United Nations Conference in Vienna on Human Rights. Led by the United States, many Western powers were insisting on the universal acceptance of a code of human rights, and the right of the 'international community' to ensure its realisation, if necessary by armed intervention, as in Somalia.

Some other countries, led by China, urged that one norm of human rights should not be universalised, and national sovereignty should be respected in this regard. The difference is partly in the priority given to civil and political (individual) or social and economic (collective) rights.

Most Western countries insist on political and civil rights, while China and some poorer countries stress the obligation of the state to provide food, housing and employment to all their citizens, China constituting one fifth of the human race. They argue that the insistence on only the civil and political rights and the free market economy can be to the advantage of the privileged rich countries and classes within a country, and would impede the provision of the basic requirements of food for all.

The discussion was also concerning the tying of financial aid to civil and political rights. Each country or state has often its own skeletons in the cupboard!

While being conscious of this urgent priority, we have to be mindful of the deeper and longer term causes of the continued violation of human rights in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. The deepest cause of the killing of persons is human aggressiveness and power hunger. Civilized society endeavours to check such tendencies.

Between this brute instinct and the use of armed force there are intermediate and longer term causes of the violence especially in poor countries: viz. the lack of food, unemployment, social, class and racial injustice, bad economic planning and frustration of the under-privileged.

At the international level the unfair terms of trade, the burden of debt, the unjust distribution of the resources of the earth among the nations, racism, the migration policies, the TNCs, the IMF/World Bank policies of "structural adjustment" and the so-called "free market" itself, cause conditions which bring about violence and counter-violence in poor countries.

Hence, unless these socio-economic and cultural causes are dealt with effectively and justly there will be a continuance of violations of civil and political rights especially in the poor exploited countries. This will provide a justification for the powerful 'democratic' countries to interfere even militarily in the internal affairs of other states on the ground of the defence of inalienable human rights of persons and peoples.

## UN - Part of the Problem

The United Nations itself is part of the problem, due to its own constitution as the voice of the powerful and rich victors of World War II. The UN Constitution ensures the power of the five permanent members of the Security Council. Multilateral UN related agencies such as the IMF, the World Bank and GATT pressurize poor debtor countries to accept policies and programmes which favour the rich countries and the globally dominant transnational corporations.

This was seen at the UN Conference on the Environment issue at Rio de Janeiro in June 1992.

If the UN is concerned seriously with the ensuring of human rights it must take steps to stop the on-going exploitation of the poor peoples by the rich at the international level. A just international economic order is essential for human rights as well as for the survival of humanity and of planet earth. The control of the TNCs, especially of their arms production and arms trade - in which the big five of the UN lead - must be a top priority for the UN if it really wishes to ensure human rights of all.

The UN has unfortunately been rather selective in its concern for human rights even in the political order. Thus it turns a blind eye on Israel's violation of human rights. The UN record on social and economic rights is far worse, it being one of the problems in this regard.

## Little Comfort

We in Sri Lanka can have little comfort in this global situation. We are painfully aware of the need of security of human life and of political freedom. During the past decade since 1983 it is estimated that perhaps over 10,000 have been killed in the North and East due to the ethnic conflict and about 60,000 have been killed or have disappeared in the South.

When life itself is insecure, it is naturally the first right to be safeguarded. The human rights groups have rendered a signal service to the country in championing this cause with considerable danger to themselves. Fortunately the opposition political parties have also taken up this cause. The international human rights agencies and the donor countries too have done much to focus attention on these issues.

Our new President too has helped in this since he came to power in the aftermath of the tragedy of May 1st. However, Emergency Rule and the civil war still continue and eternal vigilance is the price of security of human life.

We must work for the realisation of human rights in an integral manner. We cannot afford to neglect either the civil and political rights or the social, economic and cultural rights. To

by Tissa Balasuriya

neglect any of these would be to court disaster, as we have done during the past decade. We have to take care of the local situation: struggle for security of life, the just and peaceful resolution of the ethnic conflict and adopt an economic policy that is sustainable and just to all.

We have to work together to ensure a more genuine and complete form of devolution of power to the Provincial Councils and thus help devolution of power to the North and East also.

During the past 16 years the UNP Government has neglected social justice (except for populist measures such as the Janasaviya). It concentrated authoritarian powers in the Central Government, especially the Executive Presidency to ensure stability for the investors of capital.

This helped worsen ethnic and social relations and led to two armed insurrections since 1977.

## Feasible Alternatives Needed

The Opposition parties too have neglected both the solution of the ethnic conflict and the search for a just path of economic and social development. They have not yet offered feasible alternatives to the people, and hence the sense of lack of direction of the electorate. This is partly linked to the present lack of clear alternatives to world capitalism.

The NGOs too have to examine themselves as to whether they have been too selective in their concerns as to neglect one or other of the essential dimensions of integral human rights.

The political parties and NGOs can contribute towards ensuring integral human rights by a search for meaningful and feasible alternatives, as the present economic, military, and social policies cannot be continued for long within our country, or at the world level.

As we move towards the general elections of 1994/5 the political parties and NGOs would be well advised to work out alternative ways of re-ordering the economy, polity, ethnic relations and our socio-cultural values to ensure human rights integrally. Much more concerted reflection and co-operation by the political parties and NGOs are essential for the creation of an enlightened public opinion to help Sri Lanka make the necessary practical options.