Emergence of human rights in international relations

by Geoffrey Pearson

In the past year or so human rights have become a subject of special international interest. The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Amnesty International caused much less surprise than it would have done five years earlier. The anarchist used to be a figure of fear; the "dissident" is now much admired. Everywhere governments are anxious to explain away, even if they cannot deny, practices that used to be considered entirely within their domestic jurisdiction.

Human rights have been part of the international agenda for a long time. The French set out in 1789 to liberate Europe in the name of freedom, not long after the Americans had turned their backs on Europe for the same reason. Much of Britain's nineteenth-century foreign policy turned on questions of morality, whether in the Balkans or in Ireland. President Wilson hoped to universalize democracy and set all nations free. The International Labour Organization was created in 1919 to defend the rights of the working man. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed in 1948. Agreements on the prohibition of genocide, slavery, racial and other kinds of discrimination were amongst the early successes of the United Nations. The Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights were under negotiation for many years, and were opened for signature in 1966. The UN Commission on Human Rights has done its work for 30 years in virtual obscurity. What, then, has suddenly seized the public imagination in Europe and North America? (One may assume that the objects of most of this attention – ordinary people in other parts of the world – are less likely to believe that anything has changed.)

A combination of events has led to this unusual interest, though it was brought to a pitch by the central emphasis placed on human rights by President Carter. In Europe, the Greek and Iberian dictatorships crumbled, ridding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization of inhibitions about proclaiming one of its major goals, and the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe focused attention on the contradictions of a superficial *détente*.

Taking heart, the victims of repressive measures in Eastern Europe made themselves better known in the West. At the UN, the impatience of African members with the apparent lack of success of the world organizations's attempts to free Rhodesia and Namibia from white rule led to even greater preoccupation with the race policies of South Africa. Revolution and violence in Latin America spread in brutal ways to the democracies of Chile and Uruguay.

Finally, the atrocities in Uganda shocked public opinion, particularly in Britain, Canada and the United States, and engaged the special concern of Commonwealth leaders. Part cause, part product, of public interest, Amnesty International supplied facts and figures on the treatment of political prisoners that came as a revelation to many. And, in 1977, the new American President, searching for new goals, revived the dormant but old and powerful ideal of human freedom under law.

Revelation on treatment of political prisoners

It is one thing to stimulate public interest in aspects of foreign policy; it is another to translate this interest into coherent goals and feasible means of achieving them. The American Congress, for example, last year refused to pass legislation relating to appropriations for the international financial institutions until the Administration agreed that the U.S. would oppose international bank loans to seven countries (including Uganda) six of which had Communist or Marxist governments. Restrictions were also placed on U.S. development assistance to these countries,

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