



Department of Foreign Affairs
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Ministère des Affaires étrangères
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NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS BY THE HONOURABLE LLOYD AXWORTHY MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS TO THE UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

GENEVA, Switzerland
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At this time, and in this place, it is fitting that we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by asking how we can strengthen and adapt the UN human rights system in an era of unprecedented global change. It is true that the UN has developed impressive human rights credentials and tools over the last 50 years. But are these enough to meet the profound underlying changes that we face?

Human Rights in a Changing World

The breakdown of the old bipolar world order has created new possibilities to promote and protect human rights. Globalization has opened up borders to new ideas and information, providing opportunities to build a universal culture of human rights. Democracy has taken root in the majority of the world's states, and civil society is thriving. The conditions are there to achieve progress on human rights unimaginable by those who drafted the Universal Declaration in 1948.

At the same time, human rights violations continue in many parts of the world: political dissidents are being jailed, people are being tortured and internal conflicts are claiming innumerable civilian lives. Globalization has a dark side: transnational organized crime, terrorism, environmental pollution, hate propaganda distributed over the Internet, and growing global economic inequities.

Even though, in short, although recent years have seen impressive progress, there is still a significant gap between the current respect for human rights on the ground and the lofty principles set out in the Universal Declaration 50 years ago.

The UN Human Rights System at 50

We should see this 50th anniversary as a defining moment that can either build on the momentum of the past few years, or stall our advance. It is not just a milestone, but also a crossroads.

At this crossroads, we should take the road that leads toward full implementation of the standards that we have set over the last 50 years. We should ensure that our words and our written agreements produce real, concrete improvements to the application of human rights standards on the ground. This is not to say that there are no more standards to be set — but simply that implementation requires greater attention than has been accorded to date.

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