

The charter and covenants are treaties, and are no less binding than treaties on trade or maritime boundaries. But although they have been ratified by dozens of countries, nevertheless international human rights obligations are well observed by very few of the 154 member states of the United Nations. Indeed, international human rights organizations tell us that in more than 100 countries in the world, with régimes of both the left and the right, the fundamental rights of citizens are denied.

I don't question this estimate; respect for human rights internationally is weak and is not making significant progress. At the same time, I am not persuaded that the situation is necessarily deteriorating. Rather, I believe we are experiencing increased expectations of human rights and broader social justice. In many cases, partly due to the attention directed by the media to situations of human suffering and deprivation, we are beginning to understand the scope and nature of our international shortcomings.

There are, of course, honest differences of emphasis and interpretation among countries of differing social systems and levels of development about what comprises the ultimate in respect for human rights. Some emphasize the rights of individuals; others stress the equal or greater importance of the responsibility of the individual to his or her society. Western democracies focus most on full respect for civil and political rights; developing countries generally stress economic social and cultural rights. But they all agree that human rights -- be they economic, social, cultural, civil or political -- are indivisible and inalienable. And no country is in doubt about when gross violations of these rights are occurring. As Edmund Burke wrote two hundred years ago:

"There is but one law for all, namely that law which governs all law, the law of our Creator, the law of humanity, justice, equity, the law of nature and of nations."

It is the most severe abuses of human rights that attract our attention -- attacks on the integrity of the human person -- murders, disappearances, torture, the expulsion of whole populations, or their deprivation of basic human needs.

The central issue is whether an individual country, or even the international community as a whole, can make an impact on such situations. Unfortunately, it is a question to which no definitive answer can be given. Our experience is that one country, acting alone, can make no significant impact; the international community, however, acting with a single will may make some impact.