

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.

**Interpretation
differences**

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 200 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 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.

But we must be clear on what we mean by "impact". If we attempt to change the fundamental nature of a state and its society, we will probably fail. Only the people of that nation themselves have the potential ability to do so and, indeed, the sovereign right to do so. If, however, we strive to persuade governments to live up to their own standards — frequently enshrined in admirable but disregarded constitutions — and within their own systems, there may be some effect, in some instances.

I believe that our over-all objective must be to make respect for human rights an enduring international issue — to ensure that governments are aware that their behaviour towards their own citizens will affect their international standing and their ability to develop normal and fruitful relations with other countries. By directing international opprobrium on particularly despicable practices, the international community may persuade a government to modify those practices or deter other governments from engaging in them.

UN action

At the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, we have been trying to address some of the generic types of serious violations which prevail in many countries. We have worked for the adoption of a convention against torture. We have obtained the establishment of an international working group to monitor the widespread phenomenon of disappearances, and have secured the appointment of a distinguished special rapporteur to investigate the relationship of human rights violations to massive exoduses of people. We have also ensured the adoption of resolutions which reaffirm
