

The 20th century has widened the scope of international concern for human rights. We have our accomplishments too. And yet even today -- even in some democratic countries -- some people are surprised to learn that governments are bound by international law to observe certain standards in their treatment of their own citizens. There remains a tendency to regard human rights as a peripheral or "trendy" issue, which can be turned on or off depending on the mood or master of the moment. Human rights are still seen by some as a "moralistic" preoccupation, and concern for human rights in foreign affairs is still often derided as well-intentioned but naive, an irritant in international relations, and a detriment to national interests.

This attitude is misguided for at least two important reasons. First, as in 19th-century Britain, a government such as ours cannot ignore human rights in foreign policy because of the pressure of public opinion -- and I thank God for that. Secondly, the human rights element in foreign policy is firmly based on solemn commitments undertaken by states in many international agreements. If the members of the world community had not repeatedly taken the trouble to elaborate often complicated conventions on human rights, it would be easier -- not easy but easier -- to argue that human rights should not be part of foreign policy. But the treaties are there, the obligations are undeniable, and in so committing themselves governments have raised expectations that they will have to live up to.

A treaty, after all, is a treaty, whether about human rights, trade or defence. By becoming a party to a treaty, a state takes on certain obligations for which it is accountable to the international community. The law of human rights is not different from any other branch of international law in this respect. Human rights treaties, of course, are applied internally, for the benefit of individual citizens. But still the commitments are vis-à-vis other states. This alone would make human rights a proper subject for discussion in interstate relations. This alone would justify raising issues of human rights violations in other countries. For every party to a treaty on human rights actually invites other parties to examine its conduct in this way, while assuming the right to examine their conduct too.