

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE WORLD FROM A BUDDHIST POINT OF VIEW

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At a time when the world is facing a real threat of extinction from nuclear warfare, it is imperative that all religious leaders get together to form an international forum to force world leaders to take a saner attitude towards nationalism and aggression. The following article serves to pinpoint some of the major issues that threaten peace. The ideas and views presented by the writer however do not necessarily represent the views of "The Voice of Buddhism".

"We can without effort abandon our fate to the mindless drift towards nuclear war. Or, we can gather our strength to turn aside the forces bearing down on us." (Pierre Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada.)

The writer, who is based in New York is a firm believer in Buddhism's ability to bring lasting peace and dignity to mankind.

– Ed.

During primitive times man did not respect the rights of his fellow man. It was around the 6th Century B.C. that great thinkers made notable contributions to human rights. Among them were Socrates of Greece, Confucius of China, Buddha of India, and 600 years later Jesus Christ of Palestine. In our time a Universal Declaration of Human Rights was made in 1955 by the United Nations.

Many thinkers accept the fact that modern man is as savage as his primitive ancestors were. Modern man kills and exploits his own species without scruple, which is something that even the lower animals hesitate to do. Man appears to nourish a craving for existence and the procreation of his species, a species that is regretfully permeated by hate, fear and greed. The great religions set up guide lines for moral and spiritual behaviour, which produced great cultures or civilizations. Yet man has up to this day betrayed the teachings of these great masters from time to time and has violated the rights of his fellowman.

Man had periods of feudalism followed by periods of imperialism, when the imperial master nations subjugated other civilizations which had become decadent and thereby humiliated and exploited them for over three hundred years. Today it is not much different where the three super powers are violating

the human rights of other nations, especially the underdeveloped nations. Ex-President Carter of the U.S.A. tried in vain to recognize human rights in the world, but with the advent of the new Reagan Administration human rights are being ignored in the pursuit of foreign policies.

It always alarms us when the media of one super power accuses the other of violations of their basic rights, and cruelly chastises the third world nations on their domestic and international policies and will not give them enough time and press space to reply and repudiate them. This is a violation of the democratic principle of a free and open press, which lead to misunderstandings and consequent hate and fear. No wonder the third world countries are demanding through UNESCO, their own organization to disseminate news.

While there are violations of human rights in Russia, the Western powers, mainly the U.S.A., have helped some third world countries like the Philippines, South Korea, Haiti, and others in South America, by the supply of arms, thereby suppressing some basic rights. These arms have helped some military leaders to become tyrants and to establish for themselves cruel and despicable oligarchies.

The Middle East is a fascinating example, where the Western powers help to keep the Arab people down by helping the dominance of feudal despots, who deny their people basic human rights. The objectives of these Western powers are to keep open the oil resources for the benefit of their industrial machines. They always accuse Russia as being the chief culprit, while all are equally guilty. They are manipulating their power, not for the good of the common inhabitants of these areas, but for their own aggrandisement and greed.

U Thant, while he lived, recognized the need for peace in the Middle East. A home for the Jews should be assured, but should this be at the expense of the Arabs. What he had in mind was not narrow Jewish or Arab nationalism, but the establishment of a democratic Palestine, where the Jews and the Arabs could live in peace, justice and brotherhood, as they had lived together in harmony for centuries before the State of Israel was established. He used to say “the sovereignty of the individual is greater than the sovereignty of a state”, thus there are over three million Arabs living in tents and camps in poverty and misery for the last 30 years, and their basic human rights, even to the establishment of a self-governing state, have not been realized.

Then there is genocide being committed by the communistic little power – Vietnam, aided and abetted by Russia, against Cambodia and Laos, where millions of citizens called “boat people” have fled to Thailand, to escape horror, murder, and rape, at the hands of the Vietnamese Army. These little nations, Cambodia and Laos, and their Vietnamese people of Chinese extraction, are being denied their basic human rights. The same is true in Afghanistan where the Russian troops are brutally occupying their ancient land. The Afghans are

denied their basic human rights of freedom and human dignity and of governing their land the way they like, according to their own traditions and religion Islam.

The human rights of the Tibetan people are being violated by the Chinese Democratic Republic since 1959, when it was occupied by Chinese forces, and the Dalai Lama had to flee to India to survive. Thereby the unique culture of Tibet may be lost to mankind. There is absolutely no justification of this occupation of Tibet, as this little country from ancient times lived in peace and cordial relations with all her neighbours, China, India, even Russia.

The super powers spend vast amounts of money on armaments, while more than half the world is dying of starvation, malnutrition, and disease. The super powers should have more faith in moral and spiritual values, rather than in military power. They should love humanity more than power and glory. Humanity should be defended from poverty. To achieve this, the U.N. has advocated a contribution of 1% of a country's gross national income for the economic development of the third world countries. Where there is poverty in one area and opulence (wealth) in the other, there is tension. Besides, the masses in these poverty-stricken countries are denied their basic human rights, housing, medical care, food, and his or her right to work.

While the revolutionary forces are working to bestow human rights to the Central American peasants, a super power is arming the rightist Juntas. The result of this is countless murders of innocent people in the little land of El Salvador.

The Swedish Government expressed the European mood in clear terms: "The civil war in El Salvador has its origins in generations of negligence in the social and economic fields. A small privileged group has been entirely predominant in a practically feudal society.... Although the country has had a civilian President since December 1980, the real power is in the hands of El Salvador military forces". It went on to say that "the American military assistance does not promote peace but only leads to a prolongation of the fighting".

The United States diplomat most knowledgeable about Salvadoran affairs, Robert E. White, whom Mr. Haig dismissed, has repeatedly said that "whether Cuba existed or not, you would still have a revolutionary situation in El Salvador". Nor is the opposition to the junta a malleable tool of the Communist Party or part of a Cuban grand design.

Barbara Ward, the well-known British economist and writer, stated: "The greatest periods of human history are not periods of military grandeur, but of moral excellence". As Asoka has proved it before, may we appeal to all leaders of the world to spend less on military hardware and more on procuring human rights. There are people in the U.S.A. urging the new President Reagan to spend

more money on armaments. This is due to fear. There are enough atomic missiles in the U.S. arsenal to destroy any adversary, but in a modern war it would not only destroy the enemy but also the user and the rest of the humans. Any extra money thus spent would be a wastage, but should be dispensed to serve human rights throughout the world, and thus bring peace, social and economic justice.

The Buddha said 2,528 years ago:

No man is noble by birth,

No man is ignoble by birth.

Man is only noble by his own action,

Man is only ignoble by his own action

(Suttanipata, Vasala Sutta)

Therefore, the racial conflict in South Africa where apartheid is practised is a threat to world peace. It denies to the native black African the basic rights. He is relegated to an inferior place due to the pigment of his skin, and in consequence, fraternity, freedom, and human dignity are denied to him.

World leaders, to have an honoured place in human history, must appear as men of peace and not as mere victors in war. This fact has been amply proved before, when the Buddhist Emperor Asoka of India in the 3rd Century B.C. gave up warfare after victory, and was the only monarch in history to do so. Ex-President Carter was definitely a man of peace. The way he handled the Iranian hostage crisis and the Nicaraguan settlement testify to this truth. He favoured human rights to the peasants over Samose's tyranny. Let us emphasize that President Carter is a man of peace, and he will definitely have a place in history as a man who upheld human rights.