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Universal Declaration of Human Rights at its 60th Anniversary: Substantial Achievements, but the Promise Remains Unfulfilled to Many

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Sixty years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly and proclaimed as a common standard of achievement of all human rights, which were recognised as belonging to all people. The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) applauds the manifold achievements in the promotion and protection of human rights since the adoption of the Universal Declaration, including the elaboration of a rich body of legal standards and the significant steps taken towards their implementation. The Universal Declaration, comprising civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights to be enjoyed by all, has become a beacon for the development of international law, the institution of the widespread network of local, regional and universal human rights mechanisms and procedures and a primary instrument for those who struggle for dignity.

Nevertheless, the promise of the Universal Declaration has yet to be fully realised. "Despite the burgeoning of a culture of human rights in parts of the world, major objectives of the Universal Declaration remain unfulfilled, as the efforts to implement human rights have left many men and women behind", stated Lukas Machon, ICJ Representative to the UN.

The advances in international human rights law spawned by the Universal Declaration have been remarkable, from the adoption of the two International Covenants of 1966 to today's adoption by the UN General Assembly of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Optional Protocol, the latest landmark in ensuring freedom from fear and want and equality in dignity and rights, will help to reinforce the justiciability of economic, social and cultural rights and the right to a remedy for violations of those rights. Mainstreaming of basic human aspirations into the governmental legislative and policy measures and to action by international organisations has steadily advanced. "However, the responses to protracted armed conflicts, poverty, health and other social needs, climate change, food and economic crises have not contained the necessary human rights and humanitarian perspective and therefore have not been ultimately effective", added Lukas Machon.

The pursuit of justice and accountability, which are essential to preventing human rights violations and meeting the principal UN objectives of development, security and protection of human rights, has been less satisfactory. The rule of law, one of the major means to protect human rights according to the Universal Declaration, remains in many places only an aspiration. Many States have evinced disregard of their international legal obligations, by failing to implement human rights in national law, and ineffective or non-existent enforcement mechanisms.

The international community, and in particular the UN Member States must heed the calls by all victims of human rights violations. Otherwise the inconsistency and political bias in response to human rights violations will continue to burden the aspirations of the people.

The ICJ is an international non-governmental organisation comprising sixty of the world's most eminent jurists and has a worldwide network of national sections and affiliated organisations

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“This anniversary year must generate momentum and the political will to bring the promise of the Universal Declaration to fruition”, concluded Lukas Machon.

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