

# 60 years later, fight for rights carries on

In an era of turmoil, many wonder whether the UN's universal vow is a work in progress

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On the evening of Dec. 10, 1948, war-weary diplomats from 56 countries that survived the greatest trauma in modern history filed into the United Nations General Assembly in Paris to take a vote to change our view of the world.

When the meeting ended, the first Universal Declaration of Human Rights had passed. Forty-eight countries backed the declaration, eight abstained and none voted against it. The result was called a "Magna Carta for all mankind."

Steered by Eleanor Roosevelt, and framed by a group of international experts including Canada's John Humphrey, the document was not legally binding. But it officially recognized, for the first time, the "in-

herent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family."

Sixty years on, in another turbulent era of economic and political crisis, genocide and terrorism, many are wondering if the promise of the declaration — freedom from slavery, torture and degrading treatment; guarantee of economic, political and civil rights — has been fulfilled.

And in a 21st-century climate in which rights take a back seat to security, and ethnic hatred and extremism kill, maim and imprison millions, they also question whether a document of such dazzling idealism would pass today.

"The list of agonizing human failures that have haunted the world over these past six decades is far too long to recount," says Alex Neve, secretary-general of Amnesty International Canada.

But, he adds, there have been inspiring breakthroughs, such as the end of apartheid and birth of the International Criminal Court. Millions of people are willing to stand up for human rights, even at risk of their own lives.

But in 1948, he says, leaders had the "clarity and foresight" to know that strengthening rights and delivering justice would make the world less insecure.

Now, "the world hungers for human rights champions . . . sadly our political leaders have failed to deliver."

Human rights expert Rhoda Howard-Hassmann of Wilfrid Laurier University agrees there has been

# Rights edict wouldn't pass today, experts say

RIGHTS from AA1

inspiring progress since the declaration, including pressure to impose human rights rules on transnational corporations and international financial institutions.

But, she says, the declaration was created by a committee of 18, "an elite group of people who all accepted a rights-oriented, liberal democratic format. Now there's a 192-country UN that would use it for their own political considerations."

For all the failures to live up to the declaration, says Avi Benlolo, president of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies, it has "provided a benchmark for world leaders" on how to make the world a better place — even if they ignore its guidelines.

But he adds that the strains on the treaty have increased over the years, with countries trying to undercut its universal values: A number of Islamic states passed their own declaration to make sharia law their standard, and even the U.S. has ignored the document's rules.

"The declaration has raised global awareness that human beings have the right to live in dignity and free of violence," says Taina Bien-Aimé, executive director of New York-based Equality Now. "But on the other hand, there's blatant disregard for rights that has got far worse in the last decade or so."

The rollback has especially affected women's rights, she adds. "Fun-

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damentalism has flourished, whether Muslim or Christian."

Human rights have made huge and measurable strides since 1948, says Paula Schriefer, advocacy director of Washington-based Freedom House, which monitors human and civil rights.

"In 1972, when we started to do our surveys, only 29 per cent of the world's countries were classed as free," she says. "In 2007, that had jumped to 47 per cent."

However, the group noted that for two years in a row "there was a huge pushback in core political rights and civil liberties," by countries including Russia and China, and others that repressed their people and staged blatantly sham elections.

Would the declaration pass today? "Absolutely not," says Schriefer. "There are now 192 countries, many from regions that have least respect for human rights, even if their people care about them. When you look at the United Nations as it is now, it's clear that it wouldn't have a chance."