



United Nations  
Association in Canada

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## UN's Human Rights Day

♦♦ 10 December ♦♦

### THE UN AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights are the foundation of freedom, peace, development and justice – and as such, are at the heart of the UN's work around the world.

For the UN staff working in the field, there are no stastical abstractions. They deal with the heartbreaking numbers of shattered lives. One person at a time, they build better futures – for the lives they touch, for themselves and for us all.

But the UN is so much more than a safety net. It is a global home for sharing our experiences, our expectations and our dreams. It is where we explore the interconnectivity between human rights abuses, crises and the issues that cause or influence them. More importantly, it is a place where such dialogue shifts world consciousness and norms, and leads to collective focus, action and change.

#### Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

After the Great Depression and World War II, both of which had devastating effects on virtually every country, on 10 December



1948, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). It was the first global expression of rights to which all human beings are inherently entitled. Within a few decades, it came to be regarded as possibly the single most important document created in the twentieth century. Certainly, it has become the world standard for human rights. The UDHR is now accepted as a contract between governments and their peoples. It has inspired 9 UN legally-binding covenants and conventions and more than 60 human rights instruments which, together, constitute an international standard of human rights.

#### International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966: came into force 1976)

This Covenant is a charter for individual autonomy and self-determination. It prohibits arbitrary arrest, guarantees humane treatment if people are detained according to law, and promises fair trials.

#### What is the Difference between a Covenant or Convention or Declaration?

A **UN Covenant or Convention** is a legally-binding treaty. When governments ratify a treaty, thereby becoming a “party” to it, the State agrees to put into place domestic measures and legislation compatible with their treaty obligations and duties. Most UN treaties have two dates – the date upon which it was “adopted” ( i.e. written, agreed to and opened for signatures) and the date it “comes into force” when the required conditions outlined in the treaty are met, including a specified number of State signatures.

A **UN Declaration** is a non-legally binding document, inspirational in its intent, usually written at a time when there is discord on specific language but general understanding on the importance of an issue. By setting common language and vision, a Declaration often lays the foundation for future Covenants and Conventions.

It prohibits forced labour or slavery, guarantees freedom to choose where to live, protects our right to privacy, entitles our right to express opinions, guarantees our right to peaceful assembly and public participation, protects our right to preserve our ethnic, religious and linguistic culture, and prohibits incitement to war or racial or religious hatred.

### **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966; came into force 1976)**

This Covenant protects human rights that “cost”, i.e. that governments have to spend money on. It protects the right to an adequate standard of living, to the best possible physical and mental health, the right to education, including compulsory free primary education for children, the right to work, and the right to participate in cultural life and to enjoy the benefits of social progress.

Today, the Universal Declaration, along with the two Covenants, make up the **International Bill of Rights**. The UN has also developed subsequent Conventions that expand upon, and clearly define, the nature and scope of specific issues included in the International Bill of Rights. They are the:

- **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965: came into force 1969)**
- **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979: in force 1981)**
- **Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984; into force 1987)**
- **Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989: into force 1990)**
- **Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990: into force 2003)**
- **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006: into force 2008)**
- **Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2006: into force 2010)**

Among the other human rights instruments that set non-binding, but generally accepted, norms are:

- **Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981)**
- **Responsibility to Protect (2005)** populations from mass atrocity crimes, such as genocide, war crimes and ethnic cleansing, when their own country will not or cannot do so
- **Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)**

The **UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights** (OHCHR) provides expertise and support to a range of human rights monitoring mechanisms, as well as to the UN’s **Human Rights Council**. Human rights promotion and protection is also central to the work of dozens of other UN bodies and agencies. Collectively, they hold countries to shame, address deep injustices, move legislators from thinking about rules to thinking about lives, and work to enhance human rights, one person at a time, one community at a time, nation by nation, and for us all. Only by working together can universal challenges like human rights that know no borders be overcome.

Join our movement of “*We the Peoples*” and help us to promote and defend human rights, transform lives and build hopeful futures. A better world starts with YOU.

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Together, we will look beyond what is, to what could be, and take positive action toward a just, peaceful and prosperous future for all.