

**THE JUST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON RETHINKING HUMAN RIGHTS**  
THE LEGEND HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR, 6 DECEMBER 1994

If I may be permitted I would like to go back in history a little. It is well known that ever since men began to live in groups or communities, the concept of their rights and obligations to the community had always bothered the members. No sooner had they devised a set of values to protect the members of the community from each other and from those empowered to enforce the rules of communal living when they found that they were either unenforceable or that abuses could be perpetrated by the members and by the very people elevated to positions of authority.

2. And so concepts and rules were revised and revised again and again. And so in any community the rules and values differed as between different periods of its development. While a society may consider hanging a man for the crime of stealing a sheep in one period as the natural and just thing to do, in another day and age it may consider that hanging to death as a punishment, even for blatant murder of a fellow man, as being too barbaric and inhuman.

3. As the world has numerous communities and the state of their development differs widely, it is natural to expect that their concepts of human rights, of justice, and of obligation to the community to differ and differ widely.

4. Perhaps the focus on human rights as being universal crystallised during the Second World War. Prior to that the Europeans who had nicely divided up the world into their empires where they were free to do what they liked with their colonial inhabitants, did not believe in the universality of human rights. The rights of the white man was to rule the non-whites, to civilise them, and to spread their particular religion. This was the White man's burden and it was glorified as a God-given task.

5. The non-white colonial people must accept white rule totally. If there were abuses of authority or position by the whites, the colonial people had to accept this as a part of the process of civilising them, of bringing order and a modicum of development to them. They may not question their colonial masters and certainly they may not strive to free themselves. For them human rights practically did not exist. For the imperial nations of Europe, human rights were only for their own people. They were not universal and did not apply to colonial people.

6. But World War II saw the horrors of the German concentration camps where six million European Jews were

killed after unbelievable cruelty was perpetrated against them. In the East, the Japanese ran prisoners-of-war camps for surrendered Europeans. Although they were never as systematic in meting out cruel treatments, they nevertheless cruelly misused their prisoners.

7. Shocked by these brutalities, the Allied powers decided that such cruelties must never happen again. They decided to spell out universal human rights which were to be enforced by a new organisation, the United Nations Organisation (UNO). Ignoring totally and unembarassed by the horrors they brought to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they blithely enunciated their version of universal human rights.

8. The preamble to the United Nations Charter among other things, reads thus; "We the peoples of the U.N., determined to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom".

9. Almost immediately the victorious allied founders of the U.N. ran into trouble with their universal human rights. They had thought that their victory would bring about a restoration of their empires in Asia, Africa and the Caribbeans. They thought they were to be the ones to enforce their codes among their native subjects. That this was their view was made clear by the great Winston Churchill who grandly declared that he was not elected to preside over the dissolution of the British Empire.

10. But in the event, the colonial territories struck back by demanding independence based on the very universality of human rights which was spelt out in the U.N. Charter. To cut a long story short, the erstwhile colonies gained independence one by one. Mostly the imperial powers gave up with little grace, frequently fighting against the granting of independence with the kind of cruelty which makes nonsense of their subscription to human rights principles.

11. But old imperialistic ways do not die. They merely metamorphose. Almost as soon as the colonies became independent colonialism by other means was initiated.

12. Economic forces, the western media and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) carried on where the colonial governments left off. The U.N. may talk of the "... equal rights... of nations, large and small," but it became clear that large nations, or rather powerful nations, were more equal than small nations. Neo-colonialism perpetuated the old hegemony.

13. But the major Allied powers which created the U.N. and drafted its charter split up into East and West, i.e. the Soviet bloc and the Western bloc. Fearful of the possibility of the new states switching over to the Eastern bloc, the governments of the Western Allies were careful when applying pressure on the new nations.

14. Much later the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed leaving a unipolar world. All pretense at non-interference in the affairs of independent nations was dropped. A new international order was enunciated in which the powerful countries claim a right to impose their system of Government, their free market and their concept of human rights on every country.

15. All countries must convert to the multi-party system of government and practise the liberal views on human rights as conceived by the Europeans and the North Americans.

16. Most nations agree that the democratic form of government is better than the feudal or totalitarian systems. But even among the Western democracies, practices differ. Thus, while the multi-party system is advocated, many Western nations effectively allow only two parties to function in their own countries.

17. The multi-party system can result in no party being able to get a sufficient majority to form a government. Proportional representation by parties will have the same result. Even a two-party system can result in very weak majorities which put the government at the mercy of their more unscrupulous members and their threats to rebel or cross over and bring down the government.

18. Developed countries can do with weak governments or no government. But developing countries cannot function without strong authority on the part of government. Unstable and weak governments will result in chaos, and chaos cannot contribute to the development and well-being of developing countries. Divisive politics will occupy the time and minds of everyone, as we can witness in many a developing country today.

19. The developing countries, by and large, want to practise democracy but must they practise only the liberal forms prescribed by the West, forms which will retard their development and continued independence? But they are continuously being harassed through economic pressures including withdrawal of aid and loans, by carping criticisms and deliberate misinformation by the Western media and by campaigns on the part of Western NGOs, who sometimes finance pressure groups within the country to obstruct the government

which they label as undemocratic. Even if the government is replaced, the new government would still be harassed.

20. But that is not all. While the Western liberals would badger people to opt for democracy and where they thought fit to overthrow their 'undemocratic' government, they can expect no help if they get into trouble while attempting to democratise their country. Thus the Kurds of Iraq were urged to shake off the rule of Saddam Hussein and establish their own country. When, after the Western countries had forced the Iraqis out of Kuwait, the Kurds rebelled, they were given no help except for gleeful reports by the Western media regarding the problems posed by the Kurds against Saddam Hussein's government. The rebellion was mercilessly put down while the Western democrats merely looked on.

21. In Yugoslavia the different states of the Federation were encouraged to democratically strive for independence. All the states had to face military opposition from the dominant Serbs. In Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Serbs mounted a savage attack and openly declared their intention to carry out ethnic cleansing, an euphemism for genocide. Hundreds of thousands of Croats and Bosnian Muslims and non-Muslims were killed, tens of thousands of women were raped and millions were rendered homeless and forced to migrate. But the Western liberals did practically nothing to ensure that democratic processes are respected by the Serbs.

22. The record of the democratic governments of the West is not very inspiring. Unless their own interest are at stake, as in Kuwait, they would not risk anything in the cause of democracy. Is it any wonder that many countries are leery of the liberal system propounded by the Western democrats?

23. If the record of the Western democrats in propagating their ideology is dismal, their own human rights records are worse. The West's interpretation of human rights is that every individual can do what he likes, free from any restraint by governments. It does not matter if the government is elected democratically by the majority of the people. Governments, according to the liberal democrats, cannot in any way act against the personal wishes of the individual in society.

24. The result is perhaps not quite what the original liberal democrats expected. Individuals soon decided that they should break every rule and code governing their society. Beginning with simple things like dress codes, they went on to discard marriage as an institution. Extra-marital sex became the norm. The family was redefined to mean co-habitation between a man and a woman, with frequent changes of partners, or between a man and a man or woman and woman. Children were begotten

without known fathers, which in time will lead to incest between brothers and sisters and even father and daughter or mother and son. But then incest to them is not wrong either, if that is what is desired by the individuals.

25. Hedonism and total immorality are the norms of absolute freedom for one and all. Yet women dressed and behaving provocatively object to being sexually harassed, while leaders are expected to have unblemished records on sex and drugs. Clearly the Western society is confused as to what it wants. It wants absolute freedom for everyone but no freedom when individuals or society objects. If individuals or society can object to sexual harassment or infidelity among their leaders then there cannot be absolute freedom. And yet the West insists that freedom must in no way be fettered and that everyone must accept Western norms. They see nothing contradictory in the contrary attitudes.

26. But it is with regard to freedom from oppression and brutality that Western hypocrisy is at its worst. Western governments, their media and their NGOs, are tireless in their condemnation of non-Western countries for their human rights records. They threaten sanctions, withdrawal of aid, stoppage of loans, economic and trade union boycotts and actual military strikes against those they accuse of violating human rights. They even kidnap people in other countries in order to try them in their courts under their laws if they see fit to do so. They have no respect for independence or territorial integrity in their zeal to uphold their human rights principle.

27. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the much vaunted victory over Iraq, the Western powers declared that the independence of nations notwithstanding, they have a right to interfere in the internal affairs of a country if there is evidence of human rights violation. This is very noble but the method is questionable. What qualifies the Western liberal democrats to become both judge and executor of the behaviour of nations and citizens of other countries? If there is to be interference in the internal affairs of nations, should not the U.N. be the right body to lay down the rules and to act? But the mild objections by insignificant nations were brushed aside. And so, among other things, people in distant lands who unknowingly breach the laws of powerful nations are tried in absentia and sentenced. The implication of this is frightening. When you can be tried under the laws of another country where you have no rights, you have lost your freedom and your independence. You have become colonised again.

28. And among the other things is Western hypocrisy in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Having arrogated to themselves the right to

intervene anywhere where human rights are violated, surely the champions of human rights are not going to allow the Serbs to commit atrocities and genocide. Armed troops were sent complete with sophisticated weapons, tanks and jet fighters and bombers by the Western democratic champions of human rights. To do what? To stand and watch as Serbs butchered 200,000 Bosnian Muslims and Croats, raped tens of thousands of women, operated concentration camps no less hideous than the Nazis, and hounded millions from their homes and their land. And still the Serbs went on with their ethnic cleansing in full view of the soldiers and generals of the countries which had vowed to put an end to violation of human rights everywhere.

29. Every now and again the Serbs were threatened by these so-called defenders of human rights. They, the Serbs, would be bombed if they do not stop. After a brave display of the prowess of Western air superiority and sophisticated war planes, the whole NATO forces withdrew and whimpered. The Serbs were again urged to negotiate. The Serbs shelled and rocketed the Bosnians. People, innocent people, even patients in hospitals, were killed and wounded. The champions of human rights, worried that their soldiers might be scratched, did nothing.

30. The Serbs have the weapons. The Bosnians have none. The champions of human rights believe this is an ideal situation. If the Bosnians are given weapons then instead of the Bosnians alone being killed, the Serbs might be wounded also. So there would be more casualties. Besides, the Serbs will get angry with the U.N. for not keeping their Bosnian victims unarmed, and they might turn their guns on the NATO forces. This cannot be allowed to happen. The U.N. is there to keep the peace not to enforce peace. If the Serbs do not stop fighting then there is no peace to keep. So there is nothing the NATO forces can do. The Serbs can go on with their butchering of the Bosnians, their conquest of territories. And now the Serbs are faced with the fiercest threat. If they do not stop attacking the Bosnians, NATO will withdraw its troops and let the Serbs conquer Bosnia. Not only are the Western liberals cowards but their logic is twisted as well.

31. This then is the reality and irony of Western human rights. On the one hand other Governments are threatened because of some minor breach of human rights; on the other hand, when Western interest is not at stake they are prepared to allow the most brutal violation of human rights to take place before their very eyes.

32. It is rather difficult for us to agree and to accept this double standards. And this unwillingness to accede has brought

on a tirade of accusations about Asian recalcitrance. It would seem that Asians have no right to define and practise their own sets of values about human rights. What, we are asked, are Asian values? The question is rhetorical because the implication is that Asians cannot possibly understand human rights, much less set up their own values.

33. This conference is about human rights. If, indeed, human rights have already been determined and remain only to be accepted, then I do not think a conference is necessary. Obviously in holding your conference you believe that human rights need to be discussed, to be defined or redefined and to be propagated.

34. No one, no country, no people and no civilisation has a right to claim that it has a monopoly of wisdom as to what constitute human rights. Certainly from the records and the performance of the Western liberals, they are least capable of defining and preaching human rights. Indeed, at the moment they have no right at all to talk of human rights, much less judge others on this issue.

35. But admittedly Asians are not the best examples of the protagonists of human rights, either. They have been guilty in the past and, perhaps, lately too. But not as pictured by the Western media.

36. I hope your conference will be able to examine human rights not as Asians or Europeans but as members of the human race. It is timely, for faith in modern civilisation is fast diminishing. We can put a man on the moon. We can examine stars light-years away, we can achieve instant contact with every part of the world, we can build intelligent machines and many more wonders. But we are still quite uncivilised, for when it comes to killing each other we are worse than animals. The liberal views of the West on human rights and on other issues do not provide the answers to the woes of today's world. Everyone including "the bunch of Asians" must be allowed to make suggestions and contribute towards devising new sets of values which may help resolve some of the problems we face today. I hope you can contribute.