



The chairperson of the Uganda Human Rights Commission, Med Kagawa (third-left), Justice Rugadya Atwooki (second-right) with other walkers in a march to commemorate the United Nations International Day for Torture Victims in 2009. In the past 70 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there has also been additional explicit protections in international law now covering victims of torture

Human rights now more respected than ever before

By Owen Wagabaza

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” reads one of the articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Today, the world celebrates 70 years of the UDHR, adopted by the United Nations on December 10, 1948.

The Human Rights Day was chosen to honour the United Nations General Assembly's adoption and proclamation of the UDHR: The first global enunciation of human rights and one of the first major achievements of the then new United Nations.

The formal establishment of Human Rights Day would, however, occur two years later at the 317th Plenary meeting of the General Assembly on December 4, 1950. This is when the General Assembly declared resolution 423(V), inviting all member states and any other interested organisations to celebrate the day as they saw fit.

But the formal inception of the day started in 1990, after the assembly passed resolution 423(V).

The day proved so popular after its inception with a commemorative Human Rights Day stamp issued by the United Nations postal administration in 1952, receiving approximately 200,000 advance orders.

The UDHR is also the world's most translated document, after the Bible, a fact that shows how valuable and popular the day is.

70 years of progress

Seventy years later, many achievements have been registered by the UDHR, among which is the translation of the document into over 500 languages.

Stephen Ssempebwa, a human rights lawyer and a lecturer

Celebrations in Uganda



Bart Katureebe

In Uganda, the celebrations will be held at the Railway Grounds in Kampala.

The chief guest is expected to be Justice Bart Katureebe, the Chief Justice.

The day's activities will start with a procession from the Railway Grounds at 8:00am.

The chief organiser of the day's activities,

the Uganda Human Rights Commission, will be joined by the United Nations office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Equal Opportunities Commission, Human Rights Network Uganda, Foundation for Human Rights Initiative, InterAID, Human Rights Centre Uganda, ACTV and the African Centre for Media Excellency

of international relations and diplomatic studies at Victoria University, Kampala, says as a result of UDHR, economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights and the right to development are recognised as universal for all human beings.

Eighteen treaties and optional protocols, advancing human rights have been agreed upon since 1948. One hundred and eight countries now allow women the right to vote, compared to 91 countries in 1948.

One hundred four countries have now outlawed capital punishment, compared to only nine in 1948 and 57% of countries have a national human rights institution today.

Ssempebwa says non-discrimination and equality have been increasingly reaffirmed as fundamental principles of international human rights law and essential elements of human dignity.

He adds that human rights have become central to the global conversation regarding peace, security and development.

Over the years, human rights

standards have been built on the UDHR and the implementation of international human rights treaties has significantly improved.

“There have also been additional explicit protections in international law now covering among others, children, women, victims of torture, persons with disabilities and regional institutions. Where there are allegations of breaches, individuals can bring complaints to the international human rights treaty bodies,” Ssempebwa says.

“Women's rights have also been acknowledged as fundamental human rights. Discrimination and acts of violence against women are at the forefront of the human rights discourse.”

There has also been a global consensus that serious violations of human rights must not go unpunished.

Challenges

Despite the achievements, human rights are being severely tested with

increasing hostilities towards the human rights of many. And this is happening at an alarming rate across the globe.

Ssempebwa says: “Despite making tremendous progress since 1948, not allowed to enjoy basic human rights.”

“For the last 30 years inequalities have grown in almost all countries leading to the demands of the rich and not the needs of the poor, being met. Highly unequal societies continue to grow and wealth accumulation is a major problem as a result.”

In the context of business, he says, there is growing pressure in having the rights of businesses balanced with the rights of those they affect.

Unfortunately, the UN has no binding code of conduct to regulate relations with businesses as the UN's Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights are weak, ambiguous and voluntary.

Ssempebwa adds that everybody should exert pressure on the authorities concerned to change their behaviour and meet their obligations to respect, protect and fulfil human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Activities

The day is normally marked both by high-level political conferences and meetings and by cultural events and exhibitions on with human rights issues.

In addition, this is the day when the five-yearly United Nations prize in the field of human rights and nobel peace prize are awarded.

Many governmental and non-governmental organisations active in the human rights field also schedule special events to commemorate the day, as do many civil and social-cause organisations.

Culture plays a role in human rights protection

By Aliguma Ahabyona

There is an urgent need to preserve and promote the cultural rights of young people and give them space for their enjoyment in both the formal and informal spaces.

This implies a long term endeavour which requires deliberate and consistent intervention.

In a country as diverse as Uganda, with 65 ethnic groups, promoting and protecting our culture does not come naturally - it has to be learnt.

As we celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, let us also focus on young people who are the future custodians of our culture and bearers of all human rights.

In 2011, the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU) embarked on a heritage education programme that aims at enhancing the importance of cultural rights in Uganda's current development context.

This currently involves working with heritage clubs in over 140 secondary schools in Uganda.

CCFU, supported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), is leading a project to develop a degree course on cultural heritage that will enhance the transmission of knowledge, values and skills with the ultimate aim of promoting the understanding and realisation of cultural rights among young people.

We urge policy makers, especially in the education sector, to mainstream culture in formal education so that young people can appreciate it as a source of social cohesion, self-esteem, creative expression, respect for each other and groom a society cognizant of cultural rights as a key dimension of human rights.

The writer is the communications officer of Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda