

US Fails to Meet Human Rights Obligations in '06

Written by Robert ID3156

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December 10th will mark the 58th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the foundation of the international human rights framework. Though the United States played a pivotal role in the Declaration's creation, U.S. adherence to its principles has been in short supply -- to the detriment of its reputation and credibility both domestically and abroad. "While other nations increasingly craft policy through a human rights lens, the U.S. has backpedaled on its human rights commitments," says Ajamu Baraka, executive director of the U.S. Human Rights Network. "Human Rights Day provides an opportunity to highlight the government's abrogation of its obligations under International Human Rights law."

The theme of Human Rights Day in 2006 is poverty, an issue as relevant in the U.S. as anywhere in the world. According to Census Bureau data, the world's wealthiest nation includes more than 46 million citizens without health insurance, more than 8 million of whom are children. The number of Americans living in poverty continues to increase, pushing close to 13 percent of the population; more than 15 million live in extreme poverty. Despite these glaring inequities, the U.S. has already spent \$350 billion to further its questionable objectives in Iraq and billions more on the War on Terror. "The government's spending priorities perpetuate human rights violations domestically and internationally, instead of promoting and defending human rights," says Baraka. "It is time that the U.S. government makes the connection between systemic human rights violations and the cycles of poverty that continue to dehumanize large segments of our communities."

In order for this connection to be realized, a significant redistribution of resources must take place. For example, in order to ensure that each person has access to universal health care and affordable housing, expenditures on the War on Terror must be reallocated.

The response to the Hurricane Katrina and Rita crises serves as a prime example of the government's failure to uphold its human rights obligations. Those displaced by the hurricanes are still struggling to rebuild their lives, yet government relief efforts continue to fall far short of meeting their needs. Just last month a federal judge had to order FEMA to resume housing assistance to thousands of Katrina victims after the agency abruptly terminated the program. "That FEMA can't meet the economic human rights needs of those displaced by Hurricane Katrina after 18 months is beyond comprehension," says Baraka.

The US Human Rights Network firmly believes that there is promise for change, but any reversal of this troubling trend away from a full commitment to human rights will require a people-centered human rights movement where power lies in the hands of those most affected

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by ongoing human rights violations, as well as decisive action based on a firm understanding of U.S. obligations under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent international treaties. Human Rights Day serves notice that the time for such action is at hand.

Among other basic rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides for the liberty and security of person; the right to an adequate standard of living; the right to own property; the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the right to education; the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the right to freedom from torture and degrading treatment. Yet each of these rights has been violated by federal and state policies and actions this year alone. The use of torture and secret prisons, the curtailment of civil liberties in the government's war on terror, efforts at every level to eliminate protections for immigrants, the persistent lack of access to healthcare for the poor and disadvantaged -- these and other human rights violations stand in stark contrast to the administration's stated position to uphold human rights guarantees.

The US Human Rights Network is a coalition of more than 230 U.S.-based organizations and 700 individuals working on the full spectrum of human rights issues. For more information, please visit its Web site: <http://www.ushrnetwork.org>