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Universal Declaration of Human Rights
from words to deeds
by Rick Roark

A look at the history, meaning and relevance of this historic document, now 50 years old, and its foundation - the principle of sharing.

The year 1998 marks the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948 at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris. The UN this year chose the theme 'All Human Rights for All', highlighting the universality, indivisibility and interrelationship of all human rights civil, cultural, economic, political, religious, and social.

The Declaration was one of the first major achievements of the UN, and after 50 years remains a powerful instrument that continues to exert an enormous effect on people's lives in all parts of the world. Its acceptance marked the first time in history that a document considered to have universal value was adopted by an international organization. It was also the first time that human rights and fundamental freedoms were set forth in such detail.

Mahnaz Afkhami, president of the human rights group 'Sisterhood is Global', traces humanity's efforts to express its basic rights back to Cyrus the Great 2,500 years ago in Persia, continuing with the Greeks and Romans, Magna Carta, the revolutions in France and the US, and the US Bill of Rights. But she says all of these efforts limited the expression of rights to members of certain groups or nationalities. "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights," she says, "was the first document in the entire history of the human race which gave us rights as individuals

regardless of any other category to which we may belong. In that sense it is the highest expression of our noblest aspirations as individuals."

The adoption of the Declaration a Magna Carta for all humanity stemmed in large part from the strong desire for peace in the aftermath of the Second World War. Although the 58 member states which formed the UN at that time varied in their political systems, patterns of socio-economic development, and religious and cultural backgrounds, the Declaration represented a common statement of goals and aspirations a vision of the world as the international community wanted it to become.

Since 1948, the Declaration has been translated into more than 200 languages and remains one of the best known and most often cited human rights documents in the world. Over the years, the Declaration has been used in the defense and advancement of people's rights and continues to inspire national legislation and the constitutions of newly independent states.

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