

Human Rights and Human Dignity
The Holocaust and the UN
International Holocaust Memorial Day (27th January)

In 1945 when Allied Forces liberated Europe from Nazi German occupation, discovery of the gas chambers that killed several million Jews at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps shocked the entire world. How could such acts of barbarity and on such a scale be possible? The total rejection of human rights and human dignity by the perpetrators had to be countered to avert similar occurrences in future. Thus, as a first step, the UN General Assembly declared 27th January as Holocaust Memorial Day. This was not only to honor the men, women and children who lost their lives but also for future generations to draw the right lessons in order to save mankind from another catastrophe. In 1948, the UN Convention on Genocide was put forward for accession and ratification by member states.

The Holocaust occurred in Nazi occupied Europe between 1938 and 1945. It continues to remind us of the needless cruelty and suffering inflicted on the innocent and defenseless who happen to be “different” in color, race, religion or social class. In Hitler’s Germany, racial superiority was lauded. Jews were blamed for the country’s ills. The end result was the promulgation of a policy to eliminate an entire ethnic/racial group – the final solution.

What makes claims to racial superiority so dangerous and pernicious is that it is not merely an ideological posture but is promoted, orchestrated and executed by a regime, government, or military in power. This was the case of Nazi Germany, Bosnia, Ruanda, Cambodia and Darfur in recent years. In most instances, the mass killings that occurred are in multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural countries made worse more often than not by differences of economic status, perceived discrimination, historical grievances, sectarian divides, religious intolerance, political opportunism and a host of others.

Holocaust in Greek means: Sacrifice by Fire and in Hebrew Shoah means Devastation, Ruin or Waste. The term genocide is attributed to Raphael Lemkin, a lawyer whose work was closely associated with the massacre of Armenians between 1914 – 1918 in the waning days of Ottoman rule. Many countries in the West in particular share the view that the Armenian massacre as a genocide.

Whether it is holocaust or genocide, there is in existence a denial of human rights and human dignity. Human Rights and Human Dignity constitute the bed rock upon which the battle against holocaust or genocide may be fought or confronted. Human dignity is an individual’s or group’s sense of self respect and self worth coupled with physical and psychological integrity and empowerment (Duhaimés Law Dictionary.)

It this regard, it can be said that the entire UN system to build and secure durable peace is constructed on human rights, such rights to life, health, work, education, legal protection etc. all of which are spelt out in the 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Bill of Rights including the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which came into force between 1966. Not to forget is the UN Charter itself which in its Preamble states unequivocally the commitment to promoting, protecting and “re-affirming faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person.” Since then, the UN has put human rights at the centre of its development programs, in peace-keeping, in the management of the environment, in ensuring food security, in promoting health and others. The road to pre-empting all unacceptable violations of moral and legal norms that touch on human dignity and survival only vigilance, concerted action and total rejection of ideological extremism including radicalism whether in religious and racial guise need to be confronted and destroyed before it spreads.