

WE MUST DO BETTER

[Excerpts from an address to Human Rights Watch by Kofi Anan marking International Human Rights day on the conclusion of Kofi Anan's tens years of service as Secretary General of the UN in December, 2006.]

The United Nations has a special stake, and a special responsibility, in promoting respect for human rights worldwide. But I don't need to tell you that the United Nations has often failed to live up to that responsibility. I know that 10 years ago many of you were close to giving up on any hope that an organisation of governments, many of which are themselves gross violators of human rights, could ever function as an effective human rights defender.

One of my priorities as secretary general has been to try and restore that hope by making human rights central to all the UN's work. I'm not sure how far I have succeeded, or how much nearer we are to bringing the reality of the UN in line with my vision of human rights as its "third pillar," on a par with development in addition to peace and security. So today I suggest that we try and think through, together, what is really needed.

First, we must give real meaning to the principle of "Responsibility to Protect." As you know, last year's World Summit formally endorsed that momentous doctrine — which means, in essence, that respect for national sovereignty can no longer be used as an excuse for inaction in the face of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

Second, we must put an end to impunity. We have made progress in holding people accountable for the world's worst crimes. The establishment of the International Criminal Court, the work of the UN tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the hybrid ones in Sierra Leone and Cambodia and the various commissions of experts and inquiry have proclaimed the will of the international community that such crimes should no longer go unpunished. Some say that justice must sometimes be sacrificed in the interests of peace. I question that. Indeed, justice has often bolstered lasting peace, by delegitimising and driving underground those individuals who pose the gravest threat to it. That is why there should never be amnesty for international genocide, crimes against humanity and massive violations of human rights.

Third, we need an anti-terrorism strategy that does not merely pay lip-service to the defense of human rights, but is built on it. Terrorism in itself is an assault on the most basic human rights, starting with the right to life. But states cannot fulfill that obligation by themselves violating human rights in the process. To do so means abandoning the moral high ground and playing into the hands of the terrorists. We must fight terrorism in conformity with international law, those parts of it that prohibit torture and inhumane

treatment, and those that give anyone detained against his or her will the right to due process and the judgement of a court.

Meanwhile, we must realise the promise of the Human Rights Council, which so far has clearly not justified all the hopes that so many of us placed in it.

Throughout my time in office my biggest concern has been to make the United Nations an organisation that serves people, and treats them as people — as individual human beings, not abstractions or mere components of a state.

Of course, I know that individuals don't exist in a vacuum. That's why human rights must always include rights to collective self-expression, which are especially important for minorities.

But no one's identity can be reduced to membership of a single group, be it ethnic, national, religious or whatever. Each one of us is defined by a unique combination of characteristics that make up our personality. And it is that individual person whose rights must be preserved and respected.

The task of ensuring that that happens lies at the very heart of the UN's mission.

We Wish Our Readers
A Peaceful New Year!