

EQUAL RIGHTS FOR ALL HUMANS

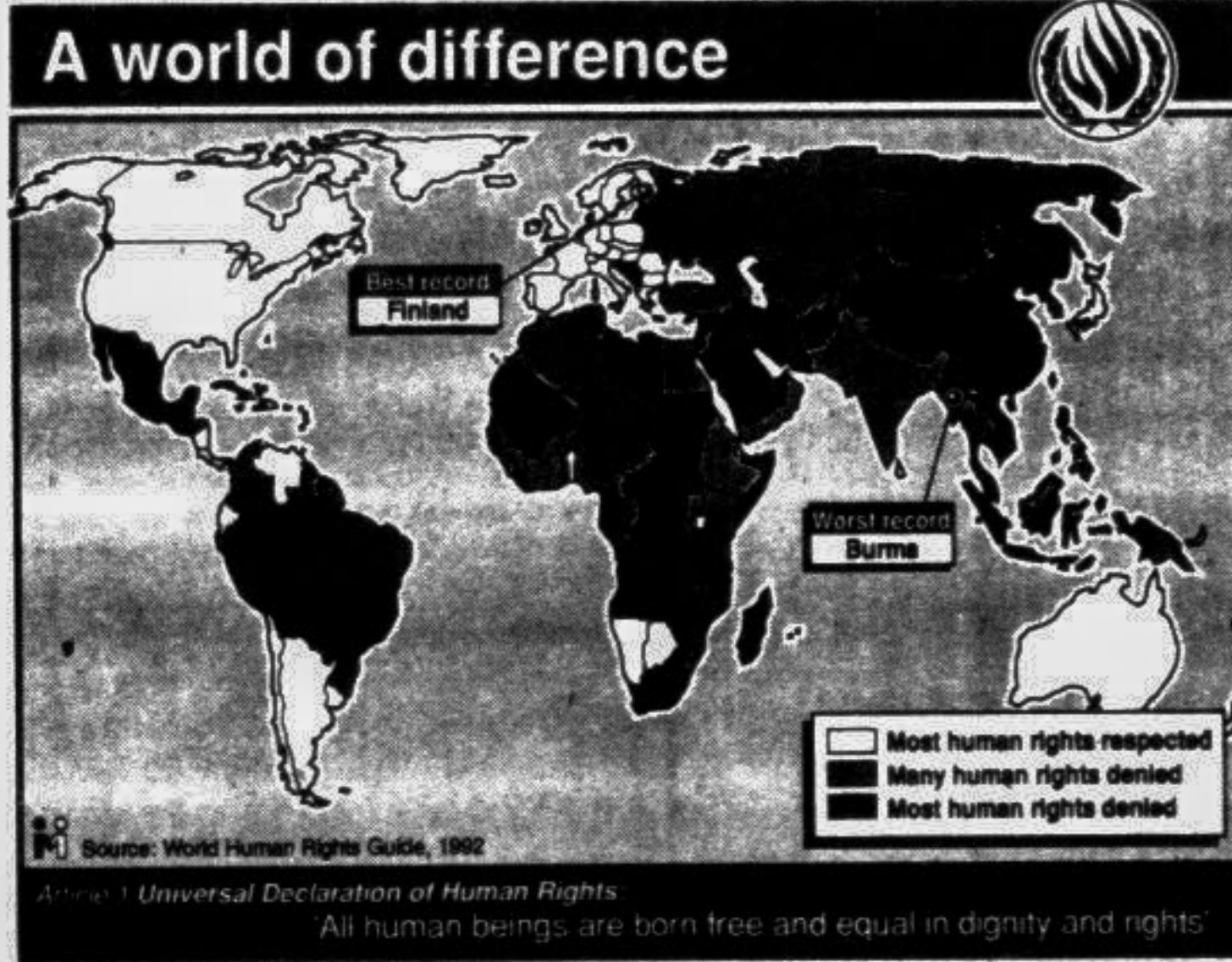
For Most, the Right to Life is under Threat

by Daya Kishan Thussu

Protecting human rights is one of the main purposes of the United Nations. One of the most basic human rights is the right to food, yet one in five people goes hungry every day. As delegates from 180 countries review the world's human rights record, Gemini News Service's Associate Editor argues that the scope of human rights should be widened from the definition of political freedom to include the right to life itself, which is under threat for the majority of the world's population.



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Source: World Human Rights Guide, 1992
All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

AS 5,000 delegates from 180 countries discuss human rights in Vienna, around the world these rights are being violated or ignored. In neighbouring Bosnia the so-called ethnic cleansing underlines the need for a global effort to safeguard people's fundamental rights.

Already in the first five months of 1993, the United Nations Centre for Human Rights has received more than 125,000 complaints about violations of human rights.

The first World Human Rights Conference in 25 years hopes to "protect and promote" human rights everywhere. Delegates review the progress made since the 1948 adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On the agenda is the relationship between development, democracy and the universal demand for human rights.

The programme for action calls for the elimination of racism, safeguarding minority rights and giving priority to women's rights. One proposal is to create a High Commissioner for Human Rights on the lines of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Another is to establish an international human rights court.

While delegates grapple with these proposals, many ask how human rights should be defined. One of the most basic human rights is the right to food. Yet, the UN says, one in five people goes hungry every day, and more than 20 million people die annually from starvation and related illnesses.

Critics of the Western equation of human rights to individual political freedom argue that for more than a billion people the right to life itself is under threat. Without food, freedom means little. But the suffering and death caused by lack of food and water do not appear to be very high on the West's human rights agenda.

Countries of the South allege that the Western priority has been given to individual civil rights at the expense of the right to development.

The right to development formed Article 28 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1986 the UN General Assembly adopted a Declaration on the Right to Development "to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development."

The General Assembly agreed in 1991 that "extreme poverty is a violation of human dignity, a threat to the right to life and a condition that prevents the most vulnerable groups from exercising their human rights."

Developing countries argue that the inequitable global economic system violates the human rights of poor people. Their burden of debt is more than \$1.3 trillion and yet primary commodity prices, upon which many Third World economies depend, have reached their lowest levels since the 1930s.

Hardest hit are the most vulnerable — women and children, rural poor and indigenous peoples, who are doubly hit, often being denied civil rights in their own countries.

According to the UN, half a million women die every year in the developing world from pregnancy-related causes. Last year alone, about half a million

children starved to death or were killed in armed conflict. Every day 35,000 children die of malnutrition and vaccine-preventable diseases, says the UN Children's Fund.

Many Southern countries view the debate on human rights as a political issue through which the West wants to interfere in their internal affairs. Increasingly, the developing countries oppose any attempt to use human rights as a condition for giving aid.

At a regional meeting in Bangkok in April, Asian governments stressed the need "to avoid the application of double standards in the implementation of human rights and its politicisation."

Indeed, human rights have always been a controversial issue. During the Cold War it was used by the West to score political points against the Eastern bloc. Many observers perceived human rights organisations as being set up specifically to promote the West's political agenda.

Critics also point out the West's double standards. During the Cold War many anti-communist dictators with brutal human rights records were kept in power by the West: Zaire's Mobutu, the Shah of Iran, Indonesia's Suharto, Chile's Pinochet and Haiti's Papa Doc, to name some of the prominent ones. Cold War politics also dictated Western support for rebel movements with appalling records of atrocities such as Unita in Angola, Renamo in Mozambique, Pol Pot's faction in Cambodia and the Mujahideen in Afghanistan.

The killing of 45,000 civilians in the early 1980s by the right-wing death squads in El Salvador, trained and armed by the United States, did not generate much human rights interest in the West.

Third World governments and populations have remained suspicious of Western human rights organisations' support of secessionist movements that use terrorist violence, such as the Khalistan movement in India's Punjab province.

It was only in 1991 that the London-based Amnesty International, the world's largest human rights organisation, began also to denounce human rights violations by political opposition movements.

More recently, political mileage has been drawn from the human rights issue. Critics point to the Amnesty report on

alleged atrocities by Iraq in the autumn of 1990 as the worst example. The report included a widely-quoted story of Iraqi soldiers taking babies from incubators in occupied Kuwait. Although the image had great propaganda value, as Amnesty later admitted, it has no basis in fact. The report was issued just weeks before the crucial UN vote to authorise the use of force against Iraq.

More than two years after the Gulf War, why is it that the Western human rights organisations have not highlighted the suffering of Iraqi children whose basic rights are being denied by UN sanctions which continue without any legal or moral justification?

Since the end of the Cold War, Western governments and US-dominated institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have linked aid for development with human rights and democracy.

"The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government," says Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet despite moves towards multiparty democracy in much of the Third World, power remains in the hands of a small and often corrupt elite.

In the global marketplace even these elites find their power limited. While talk of human rights and democracy is gaining new converts, more and more crucial decisions are being made at a supranational level in the posh offices of the World Bank and the IMF, often in league with the multinational companies.

Under the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the IMF and the World Bank, public spending in many developing countries is being cut. Social welfare programmes that promoted basic human rights to food, health and education are being dismantled. Governments are no longer allowed to decide how they want to develop. All this undermines the fragile structure of democratic rights in the developing world.

Despite several UN covenants, human rights violations continue and, if anything, are increasing. There is little reason to believe that pious pronouncements from Vienna will change much. The only hope is people empowered by the tentative steps towards democracy will demand their human right to live with dignity.



Often police action turns into human rights violation.

EVOLUTION OF MAN

Reptiles Strike Back

by Avik Sanwar Rahman

"Come not between the dragon and his wrath."

William Shakespeare in "King Lear"

"FOR my own part, I would as soon be descended from the heroic little monkey, who braved his dreaded enemy in order to save the life of his keeper; or from that old baboon who descending from the mountains, carried away in triumph his young comrade from a crowd of astonished dogs — as from a savage who delights to torture his enemies, offers up bloody sacrifices, practices infanticide without remorse, treats his wives like slaves, knows no decency, and is haunted by the grossest superstitions." — wrote Charles Darwin in "The Descent of Man".

"Rotten fabric of speculation... Utterly false... Deep in the mire of folly... I laughed till my sides were sore..." No scientist in modern times has endured the abuse heaped on Darwin a century ago because he suggested that man was cousin to brutish ape. Now another revolution in thinking about human origin has occurred, this time mainly as a result of discoveries in archaeology, geology, astronomy, and genetic engineering. The new ideas go far beyond Darwin's concept of an apelike ancestor for man; they pursue the path of evolution backward in time from the tree dwelling ancestors to the first forms of life on Earth: across the threshold of life and into the world of inanimate matter; then further back, to a time when the Sun and the Earth did not exist; and further back until finally the chain of cause and effect runs out and the trail vanishes.

The story told here is a twentieth century version of the concepts of Darwin written in "The Origin of Species" — that united man to the other animals on the Earth. The great principle of biology — the one that distinguishes the biological from the physical sciences — is evolution by 'natural selection', the brilliant discovery of Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is through natural selection, the preferential survival and replication of organisms that are by accident better adapted to their environments, that the elegance and beauty of contemporary life forms have emerged. The development of an organ system as complex as the brain must be inextricably tied to the earlier history of life, its fits and starts and dead ends, the tortuous adaptation of organisms to conditions that change once again, leaving the life form that once was supremely adapted again in danger of extinction. Evolution is adventitious and not foresighted. Only through the deaths of an immense number of slightly maladaptive organisms are we, brain and all, here today.

Biological evolution has been accompanied by increasing complexity. The most complex organisms on Earth today contained substantially more stored information, as in human being, for genetic and extragenetic sources. But the amount of genetic information is probably not vastly greater than our ancient ancestors (even back to non-human). A typical human chromosome has one very long DNA molecule wound into coils and is composed of smaller building blocks — nucleotides, a little like the rungs and slides of a rope ladder — that come in four varieties. The language of life, our hereditary information, that is determined by the sequence of the four different sorts of nucleotides — Adenine, Thymine, Guanine, and Cytosine — might we say, is written in an alphabet of only four letters — A T G C. The genetic instructions of all other lives on Earth are written in the same language, with the same code book. Indeed, this shared genetic language is one line of evidence that all the organisms on Earth are descended from a single ancestor, a single instance of the origin of life some four billion years ago.

But that is not an end in itself. Genetic engineers of modern science provided us with a particular sequence for every gene. They found that human beings possess a different sequence in their gene than that of monkey. It should be also noted that until fairly recently it was thought that humans had forty-eight chromosomes in an ordinary somatic cell, but the correct number is forty-six (Carl Sagan: The Dragons of Eden).

On the other hand, chimpanzees do have forty-eight chromosomes in an ordinary cell. The same case applies for our brain too. Though there are sharp differences between the human brain and that of animals, the resemblances are striking.

It is hard to imagine the emotional significance for chimpanzees of learning language. But it would be quite comprehensible if we see them through our tender mind and portray them as we sketch the "Mickey Mouse" for the rats. Perhaps the closest analogy is the discovery of language by Helen Keller. While the depth of understanding, intelligence, and sensitivity of Helen Keller, who could neither see, hear nor speak, greatly exceeds that of many of us (not to think of chimps), her discovery of language carries some of the feeling tone we could reckon with: "Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten — a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that W-A-T-E-R meant that wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!"

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this exquisite paragraph, wrote Sagan, "is Helen Keller's own sense that her brain had a latent capability for language, needing only to be introduced to it." (The Dragons of Eden). In recent years it has become clear that the brains of non-human primates are similarly prepared, although probably not quite to the same degree, for the introduction of language. This essential idea is also consistent with an arresting passage in Charles Darwin's "Descent of Man": The difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind.

The Jewish historian Josephus added to the list of penalties and tribulations that accompanied mankind's exile from Eden the loss of our ability to communicate with the animals. Indeed, with one exception, the Genesis account of the temptation by a "reptile" in Eden is the only instance in the Bible of humans understanding the language of animals. Along with the Genesis, the Prometheus Bound of Aeschylus seems to be one of the major works in Western literature that presents a viable allegory of the evolution of man, even remarkably of the brain: "In the beginning, seeing they saw amiss, and hearing, heard not, but like phantoms huddled. In dreams, the perplexed story of their days confounded." Aeschylus described our ancestors

tors, "dreaming" in their waking state.

If the waking state of other animals is very much like the dream state of humans — where we can recognize signs, such as the feeling of running water, the "living word" that awakened Helen Keller's soul — might we say, like ourselves our brain also have evolved from the animals and still striking from behind. As Sagan's matching query suggests: "When we feared the dragons, were we fearing a part of ourselves? Along with the shared genetic language (ATGC), the 'Triune Brain' model of Paul MacLean (the idea that the forebrain comprises three separately evolved and, to some degree, independently functioning cognitive

vivid emotions: this immediately suggests an additional perspective on the reptilian mind. There are reasons to think that the beginnings of altruistic behaviour are in the limbic system. Indeed, with rare exceptions (chiefly the social insects), mammals and birds are the only organisms to devote substantial attention to the care of their young — an evolutionary development that takes advantage of the large information-processing capability of the mammalian and primate brains. The attachment of domestic animals to human is beyond question. The apparently sorrowful behaviour of many mammalian mothers when their young are removed is well known. The mighty Roman Empire should be



Varanus komodoensis, the Komodo dragon, Komodo Island, Indonesia. Courtesy of The American Museum of Natural History.

systems that trace back to the brains of the "reptiles" and, in turn, connect the "hunted past" with the present state of our mind) aptly suggests point as a recent evidence for Sagan's query.

In short, 'Triune Brain' model divides our brain into the nature of three different groups of species: starting from behind — Reptilian or R-complex, this represents the aggressive, hierarchical, ritualistic, racist behavior of the dragons, dinosaurs, lizards, snakes and so on. When we speak of a "cold blooded" killer, we indicate our behavior in "reptilian" term. A reminder from Machiavelli to his Prince was "knowingly to adopt the beast".

Next comes the 'Limbic system', the mammal brain. Limbic system appears to generate strong or particularly



Mosaic II by M.C. Escher.

Study Says Global Catastrophe Killed Dinosaurs

by Jim Fuller
USIA Science Writer

WASHINGTON: Scientists report that the catastrophic event that caused the mass extinction of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago also wiped out up to 80 per cent of all plant and animal species throughout the planet.

A study by researchers at the University of Chicago, published in the May 14 issue of the journal Science, suggests that whatever killed the dinosaurs was a global catastrophe, rather than just regional, and caused a much greater percentage of Earth's species to die than previously thought.

"It was not a function of one continent or one climatic belt," said paleobiologist David Jablonksi, a co-author of the study. "Things were terrible everywhere."

Jablonksi and researcher David Raup based their conclusion on the study of clam fossils collected from 106 points around the world. The fossils belonged to a period of geologic time when the dinosaurs died out, called the Cretaceous-Tertiary (K-T) boundary.

showed that about 70 per cent of the mollusk species were destroyed at about the same rate in points as far north as Alaska and as far south as New Zealand.

Raup said that something happened that was powerful enough to make life impossible both for huge dinosaurs on land and for many species of small mollusks living in ocean depths. It killed species in cold, temperate and warm climates in all parts of the planet.

"Our interpretation is that it was just so big that the effects were felt worldwide, either directly or indirectly," Raup said.

Many scientists had estimated that the catastrophic event at the K-T boundary wiped out about half of all life on Earth. The higher estimate of destruction in the latest study would make the K-T event comparable in magnitude to the mass extinction that occurred at the end of the Permian period 250 million years ago, when it is estimated that 90 per cent of all life forms were wiped out.

The Permian catastrophe is considered the worst of five mass extinctions believed to have occurred on Earth in the last 500 million years. While the cause of this global catastrophe remains unknown, recent studies suggest that the main cause was a monstrous volcanic eruption that covered much of Siberia with molten rock, touching off an ice age and a worldwide deluge of lethal acid rain.

The most widely accepted theory of what caused the extinction of the dinosaurs at the K-T boundary is that a huge asteroid smashed into Earth, with recent evidence indicating that it hit near what is now the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico.

According to this theory, the crash pulverized enough rock to enshroud the entire Earth in a sunlight-blocking dust cloud that cooled the planet, halting plant photosynthesis and wiping out the dinosaurs and many other life forms that dominated this time in Earth's history.

Other theories say the extinction could have resulted

greatly indebted to that wolf mother who breasts Romulus to life. (Rome derives her name from the founding Emperor Romulus, who along with his twin brother was fated to be drowned because he posed a threat to his uncle as an heir of the throne. But the infants survived as the wolf mother 'lost and found' her children in them). Love seems to be an invention of the mammals.

The third brain of the "Triune Brain" model is the 'neocortex', though found in mammals and primates, certainly more pronounced in humans. Neocortex is divided into two parts — the right and the left cerebral hemispheres. While the right hemisphere is still found in the primates and chains our brain with the other creatures, the left hemisphere takes its pride in being unique as it parts the human brain from the beasts.

Language and our rational thinking seems to be the immediate product of the left hemispheric activities. On the other hand, the abstract ideas, intuitions, creativity, taste of music, reckoning figures trace their sources in the right hemisphere. The recent discoveries of brain functions show that our conscious being is controlled by the left cerebral hemisphere in the neocortex and sustains as long as we manage to be in our waking state. But when the sun goes down, as the darkness covers our world and the exhausted waking state forces us to go to sleep, the sleeping and dreaming mind awake like the stars shining in the night sky — in the right cerebral hemisphere is in action.

The brain of a human fetus develops from the inside out, and regularly speaking, runs through the sequence: R-complex, limbic system, and Neocortex. The prevalence of dreams in infancy would be because the analytic part of the neocortex, the left hemisphere, is barely working. The absence of dreams in reptiles would be because there is no

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