
Human Rights Day: A Story of Social Struggles

The United Nations has designated 10 December as Human Rights Day. The date was chosen to commemorate the 10 December 1948 adoption and proclamation of [The Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), which states that recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all human beings is “the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

The Declaration was the result of a process of evolution and a specific moment in history. As [Amnesty International](#) rightly points out, the Declaration was aimed at universalizing and concretizing “norms and principles that had been promulgated for centuries in a fragmented and scattered way in different cultural settings.”

Indeed, since the beginning of recorded history, all cultures and great traditions – both written and oral – have appealed to the need to treat those around us like brothers and sisters, highlighting concepts like respect, equality, solidarity and justice.

Throughout history and as societies grew to be increasingly complex – although not in a purely linear fashion – individual rights came to play an ever greater role. In modern history, the conceptualization of human rights came to encompass new dimensions to address not only the so-called first-generation rights (civil and political rights) and second-generation rights (economic, social and cultural rights) but also third-generation rights (solidarity rights), which place emphasis on the collective nature of their impact on everyone’s lives. This last category includes the right to a healthy environment, to clean air, to access to clean water and uncontaminated food, rights that could be considered implicit.

In the meantime, there has also been growing awareness of the inferior status of women, subordinated to the authority of men, whether it be their husbands, fathers or even their brothers, a situation that has been repeated in different eras and in different civilizations. The growing influence of women in social struggles as well as their own struggles has brought another dimension to demands for equality and justice and given greater visibility to the structural nature of gender inequality, interwoven in all social and economic orders, as has been demonstrated throughout history.

What is undeniable is that, with or without declarations, the trampling of human dignity has been and continues to be an everyday occurrence. And this is because, to quote Amnesty International once again, “the history of humanity is the history of tension between the defenders of privileges and of abusive or violent conduct on one hand (on the grounds of traditions, divine rights or other justifications), and on the other hand, the desire to protect the life, liberty and well-being of marginalized or oppressed human beings.”

As such, Human Rights Day is important as a reminder of our unfinished task as members of the human race: to extend awareness of ourselves to awareness of the existence of others, through respect and solidarity. While this would be the most effective way to fulfil our destiny of living in society as a guarantee of survival and of “good living”, it would imply a transformation of individuals

and societies pervaded by injustice, abuse, exploitation, exclusion and violence.

Vandana Shiva states that there are three levels of violence involved in the predominant so-called “development” model today: violence against the earth, which is expressed as the ecological crisis; violence against people, which is expressed as poverty, destitution and displacement; and the violence of war and conflict, as the powerful reach for the resources that lie in other communities and countries, seizing control of the land, water, livelihoods, knowledge, culture and future of communities to incorporate them into the market system.

In these times of war it is crucial to defend human rights. And this is especially the case when governments are increasingly responding to popular resistance with the criminalization of social protest. Those who organize and protest publicly as members of social movements or in reaction to processes of social conflict are frequently persecuted, repressed, arrested and imprisoned, with their acts of resistance and defence classified as crimes. And sometimes they end up dead.

A bleak illustration of this is the massacre that occurred on 15 November on the El Tumbador oil palm plantation in the municipality of Trujillo, in northern Honduras. The Latin American regional branch of the International Union of Food Workers ([Rel-UITA](#)) has been monitoring the violence perpetrated by oil palm producer Miguel Facussé Barjum, and reports that “an army of more than 200 security guards employed by oil palm producer Miguel Facussé Barjum, president of Dinant Corporation, and armed with high-calibre guns attacked members of the Peasant Movement of Aguán (MCA), who nine months ago retook the land illegally seized from them by this bloodthirsty entrepreneur to plant oil palm trees.

“The violent attack by these paramilitary groups took a tragic toll of five deaths – Teodoro Acosta (45), Ignacio Reyes (50), Raúl Castillo (45), Ciriaco Muñoz (45), and José Luis Saucedo Pastrana (32), who was missing and subsequently found dead with three shots from an R-15 rifle to this face; one person, Noé Pérez, still missing; and numerous people injured, some of them hospitalized in critical condition.

“The El Tumbador plantation is one of the many ‘black histories’ that have formed part of the illegal seizure of land in Honduras by unscrupulous large landholders.

“When Temístocles Ramírez de Arellano, a nationalized U.S. citizen of Puerto Rican birth, was forced to sell his 5,724 hectares of land in the Bajo Aguán region to the Honduran state, this land was handed over to the National Agrarian Institute (NAI) for the purposes of agrarian reform. The land was used by the Honduran government to establish the infamous Regional Military Training Centre (CREM), where in the 1980s, U.S. experts trained Honduran, Salvadoran and Guatemalan government troops and Nicaraguan ‘Contras’ in the art of killing.

“By fine-tuning corruption techniques and using the Agricultural Modernization Law, passed in the early 1990s, large landholders succeeded in illegally taking over this land and began to plant oil palm trees. When local peasant families discovered that there was a title deed through which the Attorney General’s Office had transferred this land to the NAI, they began to organize to retake it.”

According to Esly Banegas, coordinator of the Coordinating Committee of Popular Organizations of Aguán (COPA), “The peasants of the MCA have been constantly harassed and threatened, and what we witnessed yesterday is a clear demonstration that power in Honduras is in the hands of hegemonic economic groups. They are the ones who run the country.”

Santos Cruz, a member of the MCA, declared: "We are wounded. In ten years they have murdered more than 20 of our comrades. This is a campaign of terror, aimed at intimidating us, so that we will renounce our right to the land. But we are already taking the necessary measures, and they are not going to succeed."

According to Rel-UITA, for the Unified Peasant Movement of Aguán (MUCA), the massacre perpetrated by Miguel Facussé's guards demonstrates the complicity of the Porfirio Lobo government with the oil palm industry, a powerful national economic sector.

On every continent, in many places, the expansion of big business has significantly promoted the violation of human rights. Mining, a highly destructive industry, has claimed many victims among those who have fought back against the loss of their lands and livelihoods. In Nigeria, writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other leaders from the Ogoni tribe were hanged by the Nigerian dictatorial government because they stood against Shell and its oil mining activities on their land.

In the Philippines, the organization [Kasama Sa Kalikasan](#)/Friends of the Earth Philippines recently paid tribute to Arman Marin, killed by the chief security guard of the Sibuyan Nickel Property Development Corp. (SNPDC) in the Island of Sibuyan, Romblon on October 2000 while leading the protest against nickel mining in their island; Eliezer "Boy" Billanes, known for his courage and as a relentless fighter against large mining companies and in advancing human rights, [who was] brutally killed on 9 March 2009 in front of the people in the public market of Koronadal City in South Cotabato; and another 23 comrades who were killed in the fight to defend the environment, peoples' livelihoods and community rights.

In the defence of the wide spectrum of human rights, indigenous peoples have waged their own historic struggles against acts that range from violations of their rights to genocide. Today, they are also facing, among other threats, very subtle means that represent a threat to the integrity of their rights, such as the REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) mechanism developed under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Instead of reducing fossil fuel-related emissions at the source, the countries of the North have contrived a series of strategies to avoid it. REDD is now being promoted as a means of stopping deforestation and the emissions it produces.

But indigenous and environmental rights groups warn that an agreement on REDD will spell disaster for forest peoples worldwide, limiting the rights of indigenous and peasant people over their territories. As noted by Tom Goldtooth, executive director of the [Indigenous Environmental Network](#): "Yes, we need to stop rampant deforestation – but REDD will neither protect forests nor reduce dangerous pollution. REDD will allow polluting industries to avoid reducing emissions through offsets from trees and other so-called 'environmental services'. From an indigenous and human rights perspective, REDD could criminalize the very peoples who protect and rely on forests for their livelihood, with no guarantees for enforceable safeguards. REDD is promoting what could be the biggest land grab of all time."

And among indigenous peoples, the most vulnerable, the most invisible and ignored, are the indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation. In Paraguay, the organization [Iniciativa Amotocodie](#) works "from the outside" and at a distance to protect the rights to life and self-determination – including the right to the integrity of their environmental, cultural and spiritual habitat – of the uncontacted Ayoreo people living in the forests of the Chaco region.

The threats to these groups living in isolation – who until now have avoided all contact with the

society surrounding them – are tied to the expansion of agribusiness, and also form part of the historical processes that have impacted on the Ayoreo people as a whole, as well as other indigenous peoples of the Chaco.

On 1 December, representatives of the Public Prosecutor's Office (Ministerio Público) violently raided the offices of Iniciativa Amotocodie, confiscating information gathered through many years of research and investigation. The raid, carried out under a warrant that does not specify the punishable offence, is part of a long campaign of harassment waged by individuals linked to cattle ranching and agribusiness interests. Recently, Iniciativa Amotocodie had warned of the risks of involuntary contact and potentially disastrous consequences of the Dry Chaco 2010 expedition planned by scientists from the United Kingdom.

In response to the raid and seizure of personal and institutional material from the Iniciativa Amotocodie offices, the organization declared:

“* Our condemnation of the abuse of public power incurred and the excessive action taken against an honourable social organization with a ten-year record of defence of human rights and indigenous rights in Paraguay.

* Our condemnation of the persecution of individuals and institutions that defend human rights, which is sadly becoming increasingly common.

* Likewise, we request of the competent authorities that the investigation launched with no clear motive, nor with the slightest prior determination of its legitimacy, be overturned or swiftly completed as soon as possible so that the organization can continue with its work, and render accounts to the government with regard to its tax obligations and to the international cooperation agencies that support the institution.

* The institution will appeal to the pertinent bodies to claim reparations for this serious violation.”

The struggle to defend human rights is vast and never-ending. At WRM, we strive for every denunciation, every act of support, every analysis we undertake to contribute to this struggle, as part of our daily work aimed at fostering change towards a world of greater solidarity. It is in this spirit that we join in the commemoration of Human Rights Day.