

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL GLOBAL ASSEMBLY 2023

“Resist, Disrupt, Transform”

Keynote Speech, Agnes Callamard, Secretary General

It's the 75th year of the UDHR, the 62nd for Amnesty, and 30 years too since the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna.

2023, in other words, brings us many human rights milestones. But if we look to its months already passed, very few of 2023's human rights milestones are worthy of celebration.

Climate collapse, rising rates of armed conflict and humanitarian emergency; Russia's continued aggression against Ukraine, China's continued side-lining of human rights, Europe's continued turn to the right?

All raw, cruel reminders that 2023 is a year of continued assault on human rights: an assault exemplified by obscene concentrations of wealth and extreme inequality the roots of which lie deep in centuries of trans-Atlantic slave trade and the legacies of colonialism, that buttress an utterly unsustainable global economic order - poisoning our present, shrinking our children's futures.

How are we to counter it all?

On this 75th anniversary of the UDHR, with more than 60 years of activist experience behind us, what must we take-up, what must we hold on to and what must we be ready to let go?

Can we even afford to look back to 1948?

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Well, we must! After all, history tells us what our present day confirms: the **UDHR was a gift with many unexpected consequences.**

It's living proof that a global vision for human rights is possible, it's doable, it's workable.

And given how few examples we have of it, that's reason enough to take inspiration from 1948.

After all, look at how the world acted in response to the COVID pandemic?

It had the means to provide vaccines for all but did not. The international community had the means to act in global solidarity but opted for vaccine nationalism instead. And greed. The very epitome of what not to do.

Then, as the world slowly, unevenly, inconclusively moved out of the pandemic, leaders could have, should have, sat down to learn from their mistakes, but instead we witness repeated attempts by European leaders, in particular, to rewrite history – to portray their COVID leadership as an example of governance greatness and wonderful success.

It is revisionism designed to subvert accountability. In the name of human rights, that we must RESIST.

The global response to COVID was but one more example of state-sponsored racism packaged as political rationality. From climate justice to migration to debt relief to sexual and reproductive health, again and again, governments engineer a race-based, gender-biased segmentation of the human family, knowingly building into their policies a cold-hearted calculus of tolerable casualties – of unlawful deaths among those deemed somehow unworthy of being saved.

A violence done to millions yet made so banal that it slips by without even the disgust it deserves. That we must DISRUPT.

COVID was an opportunity to reinstate globally the principles at the heart of the UDHR - universality; equality; indivisibility; interdependence – and to relaunch them. But the world did the opposite.

Is the response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine any better an example of global governance?

Perhaps it was at first. We saw a glimpse of what is possible if there is political will. Borders opened to refugees, global condemnation, ICC interventions. Yet, as Amnesty reported it was no blueprint for international responses to other crises. The West's formidable response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine only underscored global **double standards**, and underlined how inconsequential are global reactions to so many other violations of the UN Charter.

That we must TRANSFORM.

1948 gifted us the UDHR – showing how, in the face of even the worst that human beings can do to each other, global governance for justice is possible. That is what it offers to us: both confidence and inspiration.

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Some of course question that legacy. The UDHR **was** drafted by an elite and at a time when the majority of the world population lived under colonialism. It **was** a victors' project.

The critique that the modern human rights regime is an instrument of neo-colonialism, and an imposition of Western values is not one we should ignore, any more than we should neglect the accusation of favoritism for civil and political rights over economic, social and cultural rights. We must take those challenges to heart, and indeed, Amnesty has over the last decades, dedicating itself to research and campaign on social and economic rights, and more recently, committing to integrating racial justice in all aspects of its work, as it had done with gender justice twenty years ago.

But how do we respond to the limitations and biases that accompanied the birth of the UDHR? Can it still be a legitimate basis for building the future?

As a contract with the ambition to be global, but drafted by a few privileged States, the UDHR forced paradoxes out into the open, making all too apparent the contradictions between its promises and the practices of the time.

It **was** a victor's project, but its drafting ultimately could not just be controlled by the winners.

Smaller nations outmaneuvered the large, ensuring the Declaration promises human rights for all without "distinction". The Egyptian delegate confirmed the "universality" of human rights and their applicability to persons subject to colonial rule or occupation. Against the wishes of the US delegation, women delegates from India, Brazil and the Dominican Republic disrupted proceedings to ensure equal rights of men and women were affirmed. Other

delegates from the global South too disrupted efforts by Belgium, French, and the UK to weaken the provisions against race discrimination¹.

And once in play, the UDHR took on a disruptive life of its own, feeding anti-colonial initiatives the world over and leading to regional reincarnations in the Americas and Africa through their own human rights instruments.

The very first international human rights treaty - the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination – came, in the 1960s, thanks only to the persistent disruptive advocacy against the rest from the South – notably Costa Rica Jamaica, Liberia, Ghana, and the Philippines².

The power of the UDHR ideals unleashed a disruptive force far beyond the control of the powerful that had participated to its drafting, and far into the arms of those standing up against them. And it did so because its roots ran far deeper, far wider than Paris, France 1948. From the Mesopotamia to Ancient Egypt, from the Persian to the Mauryan empires, in all religious traditions, in written texts or oral traditions, in ancient, pre-modern and modern eras – human history abounds of instances of people coming together to control the use of power, ascribe inherent rights, or struggle for their recognition.

Let's get the history of rights right. Not by whitewashing it or ignoring its betrayals or its instrumentalization or the raging double standards of its implementation. But by **rendering homage: to those who took its extraordinary disruptive fuel and made that a renewable energy for liberation struggles and equality demands the world over, including far beyond 1948;** to those who made the UDHR real and authentic, in their struggle against colonialism and for independence; against bigotry and for equality; against patriarchy and for gender justice; against a world of binary constructs and for a world more pluralistic, more inclusive - of greater dignity for all.

¹ See Schabas, W. (2013). *The Universal Declaration for Human Rights, The Travaux Préparatoires*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Adami, R. (2019). *Women and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. New York: Routledge.

² Jensen, S. (2016). *The Making of International Human Rights The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Value*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

That's why we celebrate the UDHR; why we don't capitulate to critiques of human rights; not because of who wrote it into history, but because of who disrupted history with it!

-III-

Dare we re-imagine ourselves as delivering a 2048 UDHR – a UDHR for the next century of rights - but WITHOUT the catastrophe of a World War III, or other Holocausts, or more atomic bombs? A UDHR drafted by the many, not by a privileged few?

Are we ready to be that generation? The successor to the generations who, out of the ashes of a war-torn world, transformed history through the disruptive power of the UDHR? Or will be we instead that generation of the 1930s, turning a blind eye to the oppression of others so long as our own comfort is maintained?

Can Amnesty be the organisation – the organized force needed for the task?

To

- **RESIST globalised and localised attacks against rights.**
- **DISRUPT the building of world orders that silence and violate our rights.**

And

- **TRANSFORM global governance to respect and protect all rights for all?**

-IV-

What will it take for Amnesty International to play this historical role?

Amnesty is uniquely placed surely – We have the global reach and size, the membership and the values, the capacity and the competencies strengths and our own unique model of global democratic governance – all that we need to make a major contribution to the transformation of the future.

We are not the only ones, but we can be there – taking part, agitating, demanding, sign posting, challenging.

We have done it already. For 60 years and more, AI has experimented with democratic global governance – a great experiment in global governance in, of and by civil society.

It's not been easy. But why should we be surprised? Democratic governance is complex. Open, responsive, accountable institutions demand time, effort, investment. They require constant self-critical inquiry to adapt to changing contexts; to try out new mechanisms of governance, to abolish them and try again.

In order to improve, Amnesty has changed a great deal over the past six decades. This has resulted in the evolution and then the disappearance of its mandate (something we are still criticized for!), the adoption of a closer to the ground strategy, naming and responding to racism from within, decolonizing its research, practices and messages, and committing to equitable financing.

On a smaller scale, at the level of the IS, we are committing ourselves to doing what is required to improve and strengthen democratic governance. This is translated for instance in:

1. Prioritizing together our human rights outputs so that all standpoints come together to strengthen our global and local relevance.
2. Creating a Movement-wide Anti-Racism Collective – MARC to make our marks on systemic racism.
3. Proposing new mechanisms to capture and build good practices around our management of dissent and disagreement.
4. Delivering on the recommendations from the Ukraine reviews and others before that.
5. Investing in well-being.
6. Decolonizing global solidarity – something I first did when I led an international mission to Ukraine with colleagues from Africa, the Middle east and Asia. Something we must invest in deepening, as our capacity to act globally, across national borders, remains one of Amnesty distinct strengths.

But I must be honest with you. Ever since I returned to AI, I have heard so much about our weaknesses. Frequent, passionate, detailed accounts of what is wrong with us. Just how FLAWED Amnesty is.

We should celebrate self-criticism.

Without it, major defects persist in leadership and operations. From it, new ideas, innovation, transformation can come.

But criticism can deteriorate into castigation and punishment if not matched by celebration. And celebrating is not our strength as it needs to be.

We won't disrupt the future by deepening our wounds.

We must learn to celebrate our strengths: what we offer, what we know, what we are capable of: our diversity; our global nature and posture; our proven ability over decades and our stubbornness for rights.

This is why I would like to invite us on the occasion of this General Assembly also to celebrate our complex, unique and diverse organization. This mode of governance with which we are experimenting. Our capacity at self-criticism. Our skills for transformation

-V-

We cannot afford to go into the future – we the 2048 generation – knowing only our failings and neglecting our strengths. The UDHR legacy challenges Amnesty International to go on the offensive. It demands that we resist, disrupt and transform. We can only do this – effectively, authentically, with impact – and to do so from a position of strength:

- Strength in solidarity.
- Strength in kindness to ourselves and others.
- Strength in resistance.
- Strength in transformation.

Amnesty has mighty stars - past, present and future - through which we chart a path... from 1948 to 2048 and beyond... We can see these guiding points if we lift our gaze; look into the distance; keep our eyes on the big picture.

We can, we must - go on the offensive to build bold, visionary leadership, institutions and systems - that can protect our planet, for future generations, and from all that torments us - for the benefit of 2048 and everything beyond.