

UNITED NATIONS



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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

10 December 2011

Human rights belong to every one of us without exception. But unless we know them, unless we demand they be respected, and unless we defend our right -- and the right of others -- to exercise them, they will be just words in a decades-old document.

That is why, on Human Rights Day, we do more than celebrate the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 -- we acknowledge its enduring relevance for our own times.

The importance of human rights has been underlined over and over again this year. Across the globe, people mobilized to demand justice, dignity, equality, participation -- the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration.

Many of these peaceful demonstrators persevered despite being met with violence and further repression. In some countries, the struggle continues; in others, important concessions were gained or dictators were toppled as the will of the people prevailed.

Many of the people seeking their legitimate aspirations were linked through social media. Gone are the days when repressive governments could totally control the flow of information. Today, within their existing obligation to respect the rights of freedom of assembly and expression, governments must not block access to the internet and various forms of social media as a way to prevent criticism and public debate.

We know there is still too much repression in our world, still too much impunity, still too many people for whom rights are not yet a reality.

Yet at the end of an extraordinary year for human rights, let us take strength from the achievements of 2011: new democratic transitions set in motion, new steps to ensure accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity, new and ever-spreading awareness of rights themselves.

As we look to the challenges ahead, let us take inspiration from the example of human rights activists and the timeless power of the Universal Declaration, and do our utmost to uphold the ideals and aspirations that speak for every culture and every person.