

## THE STRUGGLE AGAINST HUMAN RIGHT'S VIOLATIONS IN LATIN AMERICA

During World War II Europe lived through the horrors of destruction and mass extermination to such a degree that even certain ordinary name places, <sup>such as Auchswich and Dachau</sup> have become household symbols of terror and man's inhumanity to men. In the immediate aftermath of the war ~~was~~ an indignant world public opinion reacted giving birth to the United Nations Organization "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small" (Preamble of Charter).

Scarcely 35 years later when we look at the state particularly of most Third World countries we can only say how wrong we were when we thought that such flagrant violations as mass extermination, torture, genocide would never be repeated again. In a dramatic speech delivered to the United Nations in Geneva in February 1982 the then Human Rights director Dr. Theo Van Boven had this to say ~~and~~ based on many years of personal experience :

~~At the 35th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights~~

Over the past few years I have had the opportunity ~~in~~ of addressing this Commission (Human Rights) on various human rights concerns and particularly, the urgency of dealing with violations of human rights. Today, I would like to touch on an issue, which, on any account, must be considered the most basic and fundamental question on the human rights agenda: namely, the security of human life and the need to stop deliberate violations of the right to life. .. The right to life is without doubt the most fundamental of all human rights. Without legal and social protection of human life, the very fabric of our societies would be destroyed. ... Let us recall that the United Nations and its human rights programme were established in reaction to some of the most massive and outrageous assaults on human life ever committed in the history of mankind. Since the establishment of the United Nations nevertheless, deliberate assaults of the life of the human person have been one of the crying shames of our times. We have witnessed and continue to witness: genocide, political liquidations, mass killings, arbitrary and summary executions; torture; disappearances; killings of refugees and indiscriminate killings in armed conflicts. .. the deliberate killings of human beings rank amongst the most severe, extensive and shocking violations of human rights in the world today. ... One can argue about the numbers of those murdered, executed or disappeared. These numbers run into the thousands and tens of thousands, often go beyond the comprehension of what one can mentally or morally grasp. They go beyond any human comprehension of the suffering inflicted upon whole populations and generations. All of these comprise individual human beings for whom the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was equally written and the right to life was equally proclaimed



as for you and for me. " This dramatic appeal of which the above is a short abstract unfortunately fell on deaf ears. Van Boven was forced out of his key position and now works lecturing in a University in his native Holland. The member states of the United Nations did not want countries to be named and these gross and cruel abuses of power have continued unabated.

His affirmations are unfortunately based on hard fact as can be seen examining some of the reports produced by the UN itself but which usually remain in cold storage. A recent one on the question of extrajudicial executions calculates a minimum of two million victims in some 37 different countries all ~~Third World~~ from the Third World. A priority item in the UN has been the drafting of a Convention against Torture but the work has practically come to a halt because of divergencies of opinion as to whether torture is an international crime. Due to the widespread practice of political disappearances a new language had to be coined and a special working group was convened to deal with the problem of enforced or involuntary disappearances. The Convention against Genocide was adopted over 30 years ago declaring it to be a crime against humanity. Yet since that time it has never been applied despite clear cases of genocide which has gone on in many countries.

The situation has become indeed dramatic as world public opinion receives on its television screens some of the horrors that are being perpetrated. The real situation is indeed worse as many areas where these crimes are perpetrated are isolated or under strict censure for the press. The sad aspect of all is that people have become complacent and accept passively the situation. In Latin America, in Africa, in the middle East, people think, the situation cannot be changed and people have grown used to this violence. That is indeed very very wrong. The right to life is basic to any culture and these situations are always revolting but they are not easy to change because of so much vested interests.

What then is there that can be done? In my experience there is a clear growth of groups directly affected by the repression who in different ways, although united by a common experience have taken up the struggle of human rights. A clear example are the different movements of mothers and families of people who have been assassinated or are disappeared. Perhaps the most well-known example has been the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina who have transformed themselves in one of the strongest voices of condemnation of the military regime there and now are beginning to reap some of the fruits of their long struggle in that the military junta leaders are being brought before justice. Similar movements have been underway in many other countries in Latin America where such abuses have or are occurring so much that today in most countries even the most difficult ones as Guatemala, there are groups of families who publicly protest against the repression and particularly against the practice, all too common, of disappearing anyone considered not



to be 'in line' with the regime in question. No news is given of the the prisoners whereabouts and oftentimes they are secretly assassinated and buried secretly so that the family never gets to know what has happened. It seems like the perfect crime organised from the state apparatus. However the unique response from the families of the victims is exposing more and more the barbarity of that repression.

For some three years now the families in the different Latin American countries have been organising themselves on a continental wide level in the Latin American Federation of Families of Disappeared-Detainees which is more commonly known as FEDEFAM. The philosophy of this movement is quite typical and similar to others which are growing up in Latin America such as the Justice and Peace movement which is coordinated by Nobel Prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel, the base community movement in the Church etc.

FEDEFAM grew out of the struggle of the families in the differing countries adopting as one of its leit-motifs 'There is no suffering which is useless'. That is there is the basic conviction that from a situation of extreme pain and suffering creative initiatives can be born. Then there is the commitment of the families to carry on this struggle up to the end, that is until Latin America is free of such flagrant violations. There is the resolution that the loved ones disappeared - in order to be a member of FEDEFAM one needs to have a family member disappeared - must be found alive. In many cases that is not physically possible but in the struggle and search itself the families recover their loved ones on another level. I have been associated with the movement since it began and it has been a very moving experience for me to be participating in the different activities. While it is by no means a women's movement many who participate most actively are women and the work method tends all the time to be personal. They are people of all religious and political creeds and national and social barriers are overcome because of the common suffering experience. People show a dedication which leaves one simply astounded and while the basic philosophy is totally humanitarian and not political, the activities of the families in the different countries have a profound political impact in their respective countries so much so that to search for a loved one who has been disappeared is considered subversive and practically equivalent to terrorist activity. The values of the family, the human person and life itself are so dominant in the families consciousness that it is a profoundly non-violent movement but it is above considered that justice be administered to those responsible for such crimes. Otherwise they will continue to be repeated. The best way then the families feel about eradicating such abuses in the world is installing an international judicial system whereby the governments of any country who practice such flagrant violations would be held accountable. This proposal is contained in a project of an international convention or treaty against the practice of



enforced disappearances which has been presented to the United Nations but has yet to be debated. An important breakthrough was achieved last November when the Organization of American States declared the practice to be a crime against humanity, which is approving in principle the basis for such a system.

In order to increase the lobby for such an initiative in the United Nations and to create a greater awareness among people particularly in Latin America of the actual dramatic situation, FEDEFAM has declared 1984 as a year of mobilisation against the repression in general which is costing so many human lives and the practice of political disappearances in particular. The central motif chosen for the year's activities is "Life and Freedom" and we hope to generate a greater solidarity among people with the active participation of different religious, cultural, trade union, political and youth organisations.

At the level of the Church itself there has in recent years been a very clear concern for the question of human rights in general and flagrant violations in particular. The 1974 Synod on Justice in the world considered the struggle for human rights to be part of the process of evangelization itself. But much needs to be done. The fact that such important organizations as Amnesty International have had to dramatically expand its activities is indeed a living testimony to the concern of many people for these issues and their determination to do something concretely about it but also indicates that the problem is growing all the time and that governments themselves have to assume their responsibility so as to guarantee that people can at least live and stay alive.

At this moment one knows it is not easy to raise this issue in Europe or the US with all the force it should, because of the threat of nuclear war which is weighing particularly over that part of the world together with Russia. In my mind the struggle for world peace means both eliminating the threat of nuclear destruction but also eliminating these violations which are plaguing the poorer countries and working concretely towards offering clear possibilities for economic and social development in these countries an essential condition for achieving the full respect for human rights. The question "Where is your brother Abel?" is directed by God at all of us. "Where is your brother? Where is your sister?"

FEDEFAM is deeply indebted to Trocaire for vital support received when it was beginning to organise itself and I have personally been recipient of that recognition by families from Mexico down to Argentina who wish to simply say thank you to all the Irish families who support TROCAIRE with the desire that the friendship between the peoples of Latin America and Ireland continue to grow and deepen itself.

Fr. Patr Rice

executive secretary FEDEFAM