

Document No. **2**

FOR ACTION

**Statement on the 60th anniversary of the
UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

'The spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners'. (Isaiah 61:1)

December 10, 2008 marks the 60th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR is the foundation of the modern human rights system, the first universal statement on the basic principles of inalienable human rights, and a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations. In the words of Eleanor Roosevelt it is "*the international Magna Carta for all mankind (humankind)*".

The World Council of Churches, through its Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, participated in the drafting of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, and contributed the text in Article 18 on freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The WCC has since been active in promoting the declaration's implementation.

Considerable progress has been made in the advancement and reinforcement of the human rights protection mechanisms over the last years. The establishment of the Human Rights Council and of the Universal Periodic Review mechanism could be listed among the efforts to strengthen the United Nations human rights machinery in a more democratic and transparent way. Some important human rights instruments like the Convention on the Rights of Peoples with Disabilities, the International Convention on Enforced Disappearance and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, have also been adopted. Furthermore, a draft Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights which aims at establishing an individual complaint mechanism under the covenant will hopefully be adopted in the near future.

The prosecution of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes by the international tribunals and national courts has also been a positive step in the fight against impunity for grave human rights violations. Another recent development worth mentioning is the moratorium on the death penalty, adopted by the general assembly of the United Nations in late 2007.

These are undoubtedly very positive developments. However today, six decades after the adoption of the UDHR, human rights are continually violated or misused in pursuit of particular national, ethnic, racial, religious and ideological interests and the levels of impunity, injustice and inequality are overwhelming.

Millions of people are still witnessing a flagrant violation of their fundamental human rights in many countries around the world. Extensive use of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, lack of protection for refugees and internally displaced persons, discriminatory policies against migrants, increasing violence against women and children, attacks against human rights activists, attacks of civilians by armed groups and government forces, denial of economic and social rights like right to food, access to medical care and education, alarming increase of the people living in conditions of extreme poverty, are only some of the many human rights violations witnessed over the past year.

It is evident that there is still a huge gap between words and deeds, promises and action. Certainly much has been achieved on a normative level especially in the area of standard setting and monitoring. Nonetheless, adopting and ratifying inter-governmental human rights instruments, although very important, it simply does not suffice. There is a need to respect and to promote by all means both in law and in practice the full realization of the rights included in these agreements in every country around the world. Governments must defend the rights of the people that are under their jurisdiction and must show their political will to seriously tackle with the grave human rights violations that occur in various parts of the world.

As was stated during the 5th WCC Assembly in Nairobi, 1975:

‘Our concern for human rights is based on our conviction that God wills a society in which all can exercise full human rights. All human beings are created in the image of God, equal and infinitely precious in God’s sight and ours. Jesus Christ has bound us to one another by his life, death and resurrection, so that what concerns one concerns us all’.

Fully aware of the interconnection and interdependence of human rights and human dignity, the executive committee of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Lübeck, Germany, 23-26 September 2008:

- A. **reaffirms** its commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to the principles enshrined within it;
- B. **expresses** deep concern for the gap which continues to exist between declarations on human rights and implementation, and the tragic human suffering this represents as a result of extensive violation of human rights;
- C. **urges** governments to adopt, ratify and respect international and regional instruments for the promotion and protection of human rights, to monitor compliance with them in their own countries and around the world, and to underwrite that commitment with human and financial resources;
- D. **calls** on churches, through education and action, to work to promote human dignity by improving public understanding of human rights violations and of the human rights protection mechanisms and urges member churches and their governments to cooperate with the UN and other governments and non-governmental bodies in this regard;
- E. **commends** the ongoing work of the churches and ecumenical organizations for the promotion and protection of human rights and urges them to continue to stress the linkages between universally accepted standards of human rights and the Christian commitment to human dignity;
- F. **acknowledges** human rights advocacy work to be an essential and integral component of the worldwide struggle and yearning for peace with justice and an important part of the ministry of the church.