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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by Sikh Human Rights Group, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[23 August 2023]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Celebrate 75 Years of Human Rights, Leave No One Behind

This year a lot will be said about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Human Rights in general. It was and remains a seminal document in the modern world which has influenced State constitutions, commitments, laws, institutional formations and international relations. The UDHR has also inspired hundreds of thousands of NGOs to promote it, challenge States to commit to it and campaign to uphold these rights. The United Nations and particularly the Human Rights Council take pride of place in international institutions that monitor and promote it.

There is a need in this 75th year to evaluate the successes, failures, strengths and shortcomings of the UDHR in meeting its objectives. There is no doubt that there is a positive story to tell. However, some obstacles and issues need a critical look so that the objectives and concepts that UDHR strives to achieve are afforded the maximum opportunity of success and benefit all human beings under the slogan, 'leave no one behind'. It should be given a chance if that objective is possible through new, imaginative, creative and constructive approaches.

There are critiques of the UDHR. Some are valid, and some are rhetorical. Nevertheless, they cannot simply be dismissed. They need to be looked at, for they represent significant perspectives that may be influencing resistance to universal acceptance of UDHR. Serious, open and constructive conversation will help to shed light on the reservations expressed around UDHR.

We also have to appreciate that the principles of the UDHR, namely respect, dignity, freedom of conscience, security and opportunity, have been discussed and addressed in various philosophies and norms of many civilisations that go back thousands of years. They are not new to humankind. Human society has a perpetual desire to find the appropriate balances and relations with each other, with power and with nature so as to have peace, security and development. It is worth questioning whether the value systems and philosophical approach to these principles in different civilisations are perceived to be represented in the UDHR or if there is a need for discussion and hermeneutic dexterity to have their complete commitment. Forcing or expecting others to change is unlikely to succeed; as we see, there are many situations and regions in the world where basic concepts behind universal rights are not valued with the excuse of unconvincing cultural relativism. It is with unfettered conversation in an uncoercive environment that we can achieve understanding and cooperation for improvement in the lives of all.

There is a sound suggestion to look at modern medicine's approach as evidence-based rather than simply theoretical or laboratory discoveries. There was a time in the Western world when doctors blamed patient compliance when the medicine did not work. That has been abandoned, and modern medicine is now evidence-based. It was recognised that a particular medicine might work for most patients, but it may not work for all patients as different people may have different genetic constituencies. Some may be resistant to some medicines, while others may react adversely. Hence modern evidence-based medicine now understands that some people may need different medicines to achieve the same end result. It is not the patient at fault but a dogmatic insistence on one particular medicine or medical solution that may be at fault.

A similar approach is needed in human rights. A critical examination of UDHR based on evidence of its universality or lack of it needs to be conducted. That can inform philosophers and academics to find different approaches to ensuring the sentiments of UDHR are fulfilled.

We hope that in this 75th year, a serious dialogue, examination and open-minded approach can be taken, leading to a more peaceful world where dignity and respect are seen everywhere. We have to be humble and appreciate that while humane governance, respect, dignity and biodiversity consciousness may have been rebooted as human rights in 1948, they have long existed in philosophies such as Confucius' concepts of responsibility and filiality, in the Indian Dharmashastras of dharma and duties, in the Sikh Concepts of pluralism and coexistence, in African Ubuntu and other traditional systems and the remarkable systems of indigenous people around the world.

There is a need to reconcile these for a better and peaceful future of coexistence where everyone can enjoy a life of dignity, respect and freedoms, 'leaving no one behind'.
