

Celebrating Diversity on Human Rights Day **By Michael Williams and Fateh Azzam***

On the tenth of December of each year, the world celebrates the adoption by the UN General Assembly of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since 1948, this important document has become the parent document for dozens of treaties, conventions and declarations that protect human dignity as a matter of rights and legal obligations. Human rights have now become a household concept, and central to political discourse. We may even claim that the moral legitimacy of governments, domestically and internationally, depends in large part on its success in protecting and promoting human rights.

The global theme for this year's celebration is: *Embrace Diversity, End Discrimination*. Indeed, one of the fundamental principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is its absolute prohibition of discrimination on any basis: age, conscience, religion, sex, ethnicity, national or social origin, political opinion, language or any other distinction. Discrimination is the expression of the long-discredited belief that all people are not born free and equal, that some people are somehow less "human" than others. These are the attitudes that lead to dehumanization, racism and consequently conflict and violence.

Lebanon is the perfect place to *Embrace Diversity*, given the plurality of faiths, origins, and languages. The expression of this plurality in political terms has not been easy, but any Lebanese will tell you how they cherish such rich diversity and how it makes Lebanon unique. This pluralism has also found expression in Lebanon's long-time commitment to human rights, not only in its contribution to the Universal Declaration, but more recently in its constitution and the number of human rights treaties and conventions it has ratified. We are happy to see this commitment being renewed through the important work of the Parliamentary Committee for Human Rights in framing a National Action Plan for Human Rights, in the Justice Ministry's ongoing work to establish a National Mechanism for the prevention of torture, in the work of the nascent human rights department of the Internal Security Forces, in the on-going debate about the establishment of an independent national human rights institution. Hopefully, Lebanon will join other Arab countries in creating such an institution soon.

No country's human rights record is perfect and indeed much work needs to be done in Lebanon. The rights of women in all spheres remain poorly implemented despite active and vibrant civil society activism to ensure a woman's right to pass nationality to her family, to work for equal wages, and to be equal with men in family status issues. Attention must be paid to unequal enjoyment of economic rights and the benefits of development programmes across the country. Migrant domestic workers remain unprotected by law, as are refugees and other forced migrants, foreign and Lebanese, who were forced out of their homes by discrimination, racism and violent ethnic and religious cleansing. More attention must be given to the conditions and the rights of Palestinian refugees without prejudice to their right of return.

Human rights treaties and conventions provide important standards to abide by through more ratifications, but the crucial test is always in the implementation of those standards in domestic law and in daily practice.

The ongoing lesson that Lebanon teaches us is that it is essential to move forward despite painful memories of past conflicts. To move forward and not repeat history, however, requires recognition and celebration of diversity combined with a firm commitment to the principles of equality before the law and to the equal enjoyment by all of all human rights. If this commitment is forgotten and if rights are not protected equally without discrimination, Lebanon's precious diversity will fade away. This is the lesson that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights offers us.

On behalf of the United Nations family in Lebanon, we encourage every one in Lebanon to embrace diversity and end discrimination on this anniversary of Human Rights Day, and reiterate our commitment to assist Lebanon, in all its diversity, to achieve sustainable peace, development, justice and security. This long-term vision, here and everywhere, can only be realized through the rule of law and respect for human rights.

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