

CIRHS

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Human Rights, Education and Dissemination A 21st Century Agenda

The Second International Conference of the Human Rights Movement in the Arab World was held in Cairo from 13-16 October 2000, under the title of 'Human Rights, Education and Dissemination: A 21st Century Agenda'. The conference was held at the invitation of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), in coordination with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network. It came in response to the conclusions of the First International Conference of the Human Rights Movement in the Arab World, organized by the CIHRS (Casablanca, April 1999), at which was stated that utmost priority should be given to the tasks of human rights education and dissemination. There was a shared belief that citizens' awareness of their rights is the first line of defence of human rights.

Approximately 120 human rights experts and advocates representing 40 human rights organizations from 14 Arab countries, as well as a number of experts from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe, participated in the conference, at the end of which 'The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights Education and Dissemination' was adopted. The deliberations showed that during the first five years of the UN Decade for Human Education, only limited success was achieved in bringing about more extensive partnerships between governments and NGOs, on the one hand, and amongst the NGOs on the other. In the Arab world, the implementation programmes of the Decade were faced with a number of challenges: political crises, the discrepancy in economic and social con-

ditions in the Arab countries, and the lack of cooperation between official government institutions established for this purpose and NGOs working in the field. A number of papers and interventions reflected on the obstacles facing the NGOs in this regard. Most significant among these were the practical consequences of the imbalanced historical emergence of the human rights culture and thought, and hence the association of the notion of human rights with Western culture. This is further exacerbated by the declared position of the US, and the West in general, on a number of the most vital issues of Arab collective rights, such as in Palestine and Iraq, which contribute to a real barrier to human rights education in the Arab World.

Discussions demonstrated that the most important problem for human rights dissemination within the dominant culture is 'elusive democracy'. Some regimes circumvent their international human rights commitments by adopting an elusive rights discourse that keeps intact the essence of tyranny and human rights violations and reduces human rights promotion by governments to mere propaganda. In addition, there is the problem of the growth of fundamentalist currents with their conceptual repertoire that is particularly hostile to the freedoms of opinion, expression, and belief,

and the rights to equality, bodily integrity and life. These currents also preach a contradiction between cultural specificity and the universality of human rights – the same argument used by the governments to derogate from their international commitments and to make reservations on women's rights in particular.

Discussions further showed that cultural diversity among the peoples of the world is a fact to be acknowledged, tackled and fortified in order for it to become a factor that enriches and supports the universality of human rights. Also noted was the importance of having closer relations with advocates of religious reform.

Furthermore, deliberations also dealt with the effect the Eastern Church has had on human rights culture through the teachings of the Bible, the heritage and works of the founding fathers of the Eastern Church, its educational institutions, and the contributions of Christian Arabs to the Arab renaissance. The Christian Arab presence was affirmed as a supporting factor for human rights culture, and was described as an embodiment of democratic pluralism. It was also affirmed that upsetting such presence in any way would have a negative impact on the image of Islam in the world. Finally, in relation to the role of the arts in the dissemination of human rights culture, five papers

were discussed that treated the issue extensively, especially the role of theatre, plastic arts, folk art and poetry. They affirmed that human rights issues constitute rich material for creativity in such domains. The interventions noted the necessity of combining work on human rights and creative works, and called for lifting all forms of tutelage and censorship on the arts, whether based in the law or in the dominant political culture. They also argued for the necessity of giving special attention to folk culture and the arts in human rights education and dissemination, and for developing non-traditional educational materials such as films and plays. It was stressed that a greater and more flourishing role of the arts in shaping the consciousness of the people requires putting an end to the arbitrary marginalization of artists and innovators in their own countries. Discussing ways of developing independent Arab regional human rights media, a number of detailed proposals on issuing an Arabic newspaper and establishing a radio station and a television channel for human rights were reviewed. ◆

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