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Human Rights Day 2023: Celebrating 75 Years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Every year on December 10th, the international community observes Human Rights Day to commemorate the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on December 10, 1948. This year marked the 75th anniversary of the UDHR's adoption, and the theme for Human Rights Day 2023 is Freedom, Equality and Justice for All.

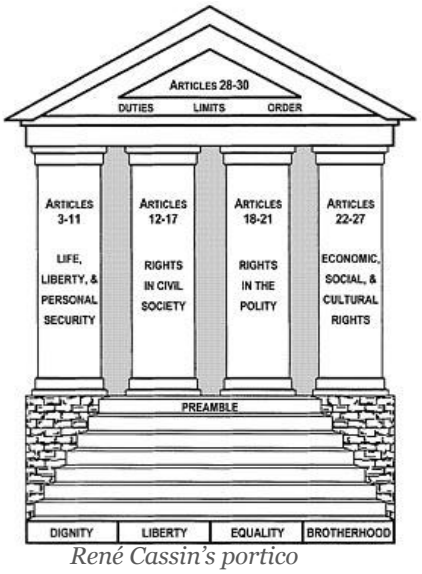
A Brief History

Former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt played an integral role in the UDHR's drafting and adoption.

The UDHR was drafted in response to the violence and atrocities of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Work on the UDHR began in 1946. Former First Lady of the United States Eleanor Roosevelt led the drafting effort as Chairman of the newly-formed UN Commission on Human Rights. In an effort to incorporate a diverse set of cultural and political perspectives, the drafting committee included representatives from the United States, Lebanon, China, Chile, France, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom. After years of negotiations, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted the UDHR on December 10, 1948, with eight countries abstaining. The UDHR's adoption and wide-ranging acceptance was particularly remarkable at a time when Cold War blocs were forming, and colonial independence movements were taking shape across the globe.

Know Your Rights!

The preamble and 30 articles of the UDHR address a wide array of human rights. One of the UDHR's drafters, René Cassin, compared the structure of the UDHR to that of the portico, or entrance porch, of a classical Greek temple. Articles 1 and 2 act as the foundation, encapsulating the fundamental principles of dignity, equality, liberty, and solidarity. The preamble, explaining the need for the UDHR, represents the steps, and Articles 3-27 represent the four columns. First, Articles 3-11 lay out fundamental individual rights, including the rights to freedom, safety, legal representation, and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty as well as freedom from torture and arbitrary detention. Second, Articles 12-17 enumerate civil and political rights, such as the right to privacy, free movement, asylum, nationality, and marriage. Third, Articles 18-21 detail spiritual, public, and political freedoms, including freedom of religion, speech, and assembly and the right to political



René Cassin's portico

participation. Fourth, Articles 22-27 establish social, economic, and cultural rights, such as access to fair employment, education, and social services. Articles

28-30, which represent the triangular pediment that holds the entire structure together, address the duty of individuals and governments to cooperate in the effort to uphold each of these rights for all people.

A Lasting Legacy

Although the UDHR is not legally binding, its principles have been incorporated into many countries' constitutions and domestic legal systems. In addition, the UDHR is widely regarded as the foundation of international human rights law and is the basis for over 70 binding human rights treaties at the global and regional levels. However, conflicts around the world, including the wars in Gaza and Ukraine and the internal conflicts in Sudan and Myanmar, continue to create human rights challenges. As the international community celebrates the UDHR's 75th anniversary on Human Rights Day 2023, the UDHR and the rights it seeks to protect are as important as ever.