

Op-ed by Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International

Terrorists go on a rampage of senseless killing in Mumbai. Exhausted and terrified refugees pour into Uganda to escape the fighting in eastern Congo. Ten people are executed in Iran. Three hundred thousand civilians are displaced in northern Sri Lanka. Slowing rates of economic growth cast deep gloom around the world. Not a particularly auspicious moment to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Anniversaries are a time for reflection and review. It is true that in many respects the human rights situation today is vastly improved from that in 1948. The equality of women, the rights of children, a free press and a fair judicial system are no longer disputed concepts but widely accepted standards that many countries have achieved and others are aspiring to. But it is equally true that injustice, impunity and inequality remain the hallmarks of our time.

If there is one lesson to be drawn from recent events in Mumbai, it is that our liberties remain precious, under threat, and in need of constant vigilance and protection. Governments have a duty to protect people from terrorism, and they will be under pressure - as happened after 9/11 - to tighten security. But in that process they must not repeat the mistakes of the US-led War on Terror. Detaining people indefinitely, holding them in legal limbo in prisons like Guantanamo camp, condoning or conducting torture, weakening due process and the rule of law are not the way forward. Free societies are attacked by terrorists precisely because they are free. To erode our freedoms in the name of security is to hand victory to the terrorists.

It is not enough, though, simply to hold on to our rights. We must expand the benefits of human rights to all who are deprived, discriminated and excluded. The global financial crisis has shown how wrong was the assumption that unrestrained growth would inevitably lead to prosperity, and that the rising tide would lift all boats. The tide has become a tsunami swallowing not only big financial institutions but also the homes and hopes of many poor people around the world. Millions of people are being pushed back into poverty even as billions of dollars are being invested in bailing out those very institutions that have brought us to this state.

Wealthier nations have resources and established safety nets to help those who fall behind in their country. The poor in poor and emerging economies have to fend for themselves. Those with the least margin of survival will pay the most for the greed of the bankers in Wall Street and the City of London. Women working in a garment factory in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, miners hauling minerals from Mano River in West Africa, workers at an industrial estate in the Pearl River Delta in China, telephone operators at an outsourced office in Gurgaon, India will bear

the heaviest brunt of the economic decline. If falling remittances and international aid force governments to cut back on social programmes and poverty eradication projects, the consequences could be disastrous.

In economic terms, growth is being wiped out. In human rights terms, the rights to food, education, housing, decent work and health are under attack. We face a dual challenge: fulfilling human rights in order to eradicate poverty and preserving human rights in the face of terrorism.

Human rights are universal – every person is born free and equal in rights and dignity. Human rights are indivisible – all rights, whether economic, social, civil, political or cultural - are equally important. There is no hierarchy of rights. Free speech is as essential as the right to education, the right to health as valuable as the right to a fair trial.

The tectonic plates of global power are shifting, and there is now realization among world leaders that they must work together if they are to deal with the economic maelstrom. The invitation extended by the US Administration recently to twenty leading economies of the world – including China, Saudi Arabia, India, and Brazil - to plan a global response to the economic crisis is a concrete sign of the new drive to be inclusive.

Being inclusive does not only mean fitting more chairs around the existing table. It also means signing up to global values. The Universal Declaration provides those set of values.

In 1948, in the face of the enormous challenges, world leaders turned to the Universal Declaration as the affirmation of their common humanity and the blue print for their collective security. Today's world leaders must do the same.