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Recently I made a visit to several countries in Asia. Many people in Norway had expressed concern about aspects of the human rights situation in the countries I visited, and I discussed these issues with my hosts.

I discerned - once again - that much of the apprehensiveness towards human rights scrutiny was rooted in the legacy of colonialism. Who is it that is being critical? Many third world countries remember how the colonial powers fared when they were in charge. They remember systematic human rights violations of a scale and scope which is absent in these countries today. They feel that part of the foreign criticism is unfair in the light of great social and economic achievement. We in the West should not forget that there is a history that goes further back than to 1948 and the Universal Declaration.

But there is now a set of rights and values that transcends all borders and cultures. A recent article from the UN Human Rights Centre counts 80 human rights instruments that have been adopted over five decades. And these set strict and necessary limits as to how far it is permissible to go in pleading cultural relativism.

It is clearly going too far when it was stated at the Women's Conference in Beijing: "The West, to be frank, is attempting to impose its cultural pattern as an international model".

This is wrong. Most countries are today strongly defending their own cultures. And there is more respect and mutual understanding of the value of other cultures and religions now than ever before.

All our societies are increasingly becoming multi-cultural and multi-ethnic. Moreover, we increasingly have access to the same information, by television, wire services, and new sophisticated means of communications. This is a basis we must build on.

But there are limits to the practices that countries can expect the international community to accept, or condone, even when such practices have deep cultural roots.

The state becomes an accomplice if such practices are seen as a separate cultural category of behavior extraneous to the realm of justice and law enforcement.

We cannot isolate international relations from the wider mutual general curiosity, public interest and opinionated public debate.

Sometimes, the European and American configuration of speech is perceived as unduly and intrusively explicit by the more subtle traditions

of communications prevalent in other regions. But the people in the West have opinions, and will express opinions. Sometimes we are told that Third World countries are different and that they cannot be measured in each and every respect by the same yardstick as Western countries apply to one another. But too often, the explanations offered stop there. It is not expected that every country should be governed by the Westminster system of democracy. But the human rights situations around the world is monitored closely, and the findings of the United Nations and of non-governmental organizations will influence public debates. This situation has come to stay.

We enter a future where facts can no longer be concealed. Industrialized countries are used to a critical press and a critical public opinion. Such public scrutiny has come to stay.

In each country and in the UN we must move from a state of international legislation to a state of national implementation. Treaty bodies will continue to play an important role in supervising the states' implementations of their obligations. In addition, we have the Human Rights Commission and now the office of the High Commissioner.

Field operations such as in Rwanda has established an important precedence. Perpetrators of serious violations of human right must be held accountable and must be prosecuted. The ad hoc tribunals for former Yugoslavia and Rwanda must be precursors for a Permanent International Criminal Court. But such a court cannot deal with much more than the absolute breakdowns of civilization.

The situation of real people in a real world is reflected in the degree to which the decisions of Vienna, Rio, Cairo, Copenhagen and Beijing are implemented. When they are, we will need less international policing, and less intervention, less mutual criticism.

Meanwhile, the rights and freedoms of Human Rights Defenders must be guarded. The rights to criticize is perhaps the most important right. If that right is ungranted, perhaps there is an unpleasant reason. Without that right cases and issues may be papered over and people disappear.

The freedom to criticize must be the superior norm for the next 50 years. Time and again we have heard lectures about the intrinsic value of non-interference. They represent losing propositions in a world where information cannot any longer be curtailed.

Here in the UN we need more frank speech. We need to say things as they are. The technology revolution will be permanently unfaithful to half-truths and euphemisms. Those who want to hold back will lose. And truth will permeate all our work and in the end - sooner or later - freedom and opportunity will prevail.