

## **The road to Vienna went through Bangkok**

Pat Walsh

Whether it came up in the shower, driving to work or over coffee, I've no idea. But whoever first mooted the idea of the 1993 world conference on human rights (was it John Pace?) deserves to be named and celebrated. It was a brilliant move, inspired by the idea of building East-West consensus on human rights, following the end of the Cold War.

The case for the conference ran like this. If the disintegrating socialist bloc that saw human rights exclusively in social and economic terms and the capitalist bloc that prioritised civil and political rights could now find common ground, then, voila, victims of all human rights violations, whether political or economic and cultural, could really enjoy the rights promised by the so-called Universal Declaration of Human Rights back in 1948, over four decades before. The Declaration's revolutionary and beautiful Article 1 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights' might actually become a global reality.

To be truly universal (and helpful to all victims), however, this new consensus needed everybody to be not only involved but also prepared to review their ideological hangups and their budgets. A big and risky ask. In the West, giving equal weight to social and economic rights might sound too much like Cuba and had big cost implications. Australian Foreign Affairs officials said at the time that they never discussed economic rights in their policy considerations. Broadening the agenda would also require larger grants by affluent Western nations to the UN which spent a mere 0.7% of its regular budget on human rights. The UN human rights watchdog was already underfed, had a muted bark, lacked legs and teeth (having, it was claimed, fewer staff than Amnesty International), and too often responded only to the whistle of its political masters not the victims it was established to protect.

On the other hand, regimes oppressive of civil and political rights, might smell a rat. In the run-up to the conference, Muslim nations banded together for the first time in the history of the UN Commission on Human Rights to oppose Western pressures on human rights. In another twist, China and some newly affluent nations in Asia like Soeharto's Indonesia argued that civil and political freedoms should wait until their societies reached a level of development comparable to western nations and that Asians had a different concept of human rights. Touche! The spectre of a North-South divide threatened to replace the East-West split and de-rail the whole laudable enterprise.

A further element of unpredictability was that the UN in 1993 had twice as many members, many of them from former western colonies, as it had in 1968 when the first world conference on human rights was held in Teheran, Iran (opened, interestingly, by Burma's U Thant and His Imperial Majesty the Shahinshah, following a minute's silence in memory of Martin Luther King, and dominated by the issue of racism).

Vienna was different to Teheran in another spectacular and telling way. It marked the arrival of civil society as a force for human rights in a big way. Though many governments were hostile and dismissed even home-grown NGOs as western meddling in disguise, global governance in 1993 was no longer the sole domain of governments, Thousands of civil society organizations, many of which had

mushroomed in the semi-darkness of nations resistant to human rights, embraced the idea of the world conference with great enthusiasm and had the mojo to take on the revisionists. NGOs from the Asia-Pacific region were prominent amongst them.

Vienna was like next year's World Cup in Rio. To get there you first had to qualify, as it were. The qualifying match for the Asia-Pacific region was entitled the World Conference on Human Rights Preparatory Regional Meeting for Asia and was held two months before Vienna in the newly completed UN conference hall in Bangkok, 29 March-2 April 1993. 49 governments and 240 representatives from 110 NGOs participated. The latter came from 18 countries stretching in an arc from Bangladesh round to Korea and included a leadership group as deft with their tongues and tactics as the footwork of any soccer pro.

Many such as Cecilia Jimenez from the Philippines, Ravi Nair from India, Sivarasa Rasiiah from Malaysia, Andre Frankovits and Eric Sidoti from Australia and, the principal organiser, Boonthan Verawongse from Thailand, were also experienced campaigners. Japan, Korea and the Philippines had big delegations. International organizations like Amnesty International injected global vision and knowledge. Solidarity groups representing pressing immediate issues such as Palestine, East Timor, Tibet, Burma, Bougainville and migrant workers, kept us grounded. I represented the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (now ACFID). NGO colleagues from New Zealand and the Pacific Islands were conspicuously absent. I felt bad about this at the time but looking back now I think this failure (with the puzzling exception of New Zealand) was due mainly to communication problems and the prohibitive cost of travel from the Pacific.

We prepared for the inter-governmental gathering by caucusing alone for 4 days at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University. German church bodies and the Canadian Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development provided the funding. Records of UN member compliance with key UN human rights instruments were studied, with particular attention to the performance of recalcitrants. The statistics showed that 27 UN members heading to Vienna from the region had not even ratified the Covenant on civil and political rights and that most (38) had not ratified the Convention against torture! Asia-Pacific was the only region without a human rights treaty and mechanism and few countries in the region had national human rights institutions. Passionate speeches were given. Solidarity groups competed for their respective causes. Jose Ramos-Horta on one occasion blasted NGOs for taking more interest in Burma than East Timor because Aung San Suu Kyi was pretty. Momentum built. The case for Vienna strengthened and a united position was reached. Typed up late at night, we called it the Bangkok NGO Declaration on Human Rights.

The number and range of deserving causes represented at the conference made the process of negotiating the contents of the Declaration politically challenging. The reality was the conference had to juggle the demands of participants whose main concern was to win support for their issue with the concerns of those focussed on the bigger picture. Should the conference ask for the sun, moon and stars in a bid to satisfy everyone? Or was it smarter, bearing in mind that the Vienna conference would not deal with the issues of one region alone, to focus on core, long-term policy matters and deliver a clear take home message rather than a babble of voices?

There was also a sense that more was needed in a Declaration than long lists of injustices designed to embarrass and engender moral indignation. Fire and light were both needed to rebut the not unsophisticated arguments being put by the revisionists. Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Beijing et al all declared their in-principle

commitment to human rights but called for ‘flexibility’, ‘symmetry’, ‘time’, ‘balance’ and ‘understanding’ of their special cultural, political and economic circumstances. Poverty should be addressed by prioritising the right to development and ending aid conditionality, said Indonesia. How can one express opinions freely if one is illiterate? How can one enjoy the right to property if one is below the poverty line? challenged Indonesia’s spokesperson.

As it turned out, the NGO Declaration ran to 16 pages and addressed all these issues. It started, however, with a stout defence of universality and indivisibility. As NGOs from the region where these fundamentals were especially being challenged, we felt a strong obligation to make it known in Vienna that many Asian governments were not representing informed Asian public opinion. We also knew that allowing exceptions on specious cultural or economic grounds was another way of accommodating impunity. It would undermine the whole edifice and work against those whom our colleagues felt most strongly about – women, indigenous minorities, children, workers, refugees and human rights advocates working for self-determination, justice and democracy.

We got a hearing in the media, particularly the Bangkok Post, and from some governments, notably Japan which dissented from some parts of the official Bangkok Declaration when it was issued on 2 April. The government drafting committee, chaired by Iran, gave us one hour to present our Declaration. Some common ground was identified, but the hardliners dug in on the key issues. Despite our efforts, the official Declaration claimed to contain the aspirations of the Asian region and stressed ‘particularities’ and national sovereignty.

Clearly we needed to make sure a strong alternative Asian voice was heard in Vienna. We went home to fundraise and pack our bags.

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*This article was published in Diplomacy Training Program E-Newsletter, No 27, June 2013.*

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