**The worst cruelty is our indifference**

Op-ed by Prof. Nils Melzer, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture

Today, we observe Human Rights Day. On this day, we remember that human dignity is universal and the prohibition of torture is absolute. At the same time, we know that torture, cruelty, and humiliation is still practiced with impunity throughout the world.

Today, I am particularly concerned about the unspeakable suffering of people on the move, those millions of women, men and children who have left their homes to seek safety and opportunity elsewhere, but who all too often get trapped in border-zones, detention centers, deserts or at sea, exposed not only to deliberate abuse, but also to the worst cruelty of all: our own indifference.

We know these people are exploited by smugglers, traffickers and corrupt officials, we know they are being tortured, raped, enslaved, and butchered for their organs. We know they have nowhere else to go. And yet, no one feels responsible. Instead, we erect physical and mental barriers, we think and speak of hostile invasion and send the military to defend our borders. But today I ask: against whom? Against this ragtag “army” of emaciated bodies, carrying their belongings in plastic bags and babies in their arms?

Have we shrunk so far from our own humanity that we can no longer recognize theirs? Or are we simply too comfortable to recognize that much of our own prosperity grows on the ashes of other peoples’ lives, on the swamps of inhumane working conditions, on the blood spilt by conflicts fought with our weapons, on the smoldering remnants of an environment destroyed by our extractive companies? After we have exploited their labor, ransacked their environment, colluded with their dictators and fueled conflict that turned their lands into battlefields – are we *really* surprised they come knocking on our doors saying they would rather live at our place now?

Human Rights Day also makes me remember the countless prisoners I have visited over the years, in wars from the Balkans to the Middle East and, more recently, in Turkey, Serbia and Kosovo[[1]](#footnote-1), Argentina and Ukraine. Some were hungry, others were cold. Some were sick and others depressed. Some had been threatened, abused and humiliated. Some had no space to sleep or even sit, and many suffered from bedbugs, rats and lice. But the first question they asked was never about themselves. “Sir, do you have news of my family? Can you take a letter for them? Please tell them I love them!” This taught me that, whoever and wherever we are and whatever we have done, we always remain members not only of our own families, but also of the global human family.

As we mark Human Rights Day, we also approach the festive seasons being celebrated worldwide. And as we gather with our loved ones around Christmas trees, dining tables and living rooms, do we ever ask ourselves what it feels like to be stuck in a rubber dinghy that day, facing the choice between drowning in the freezing sea or going back to torture and abuse?

Do we ever ask ourselves what it feels like to be stuck in an overcrowded cell, wondering whether you will be raped that day? Do we ever ask ourselves what it feels like to be a child stuck in a coal mine that day, your lungs burning from the dust? And do we ever ask ourselves who is being most deeply dehumanized in a world tolerating such abuse: Is it the victims, ripped apart by pain and humiliation? Is it the perpetrators, lowering themselves below the most ferocious of beasts? Or is it all of us, wining and dining in the bubbles of our cozy homes while our siblings are being broken, crushed and annihilated on our front steps?

Arising from the ashes of World War II, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed nothing less than a global human family based on peace, justice and human dignity. Today, 70 years later, we still have not delivered on that promise, and we still have to look in the mirror and face the truth that, if we don’t change our ways, step up and take responsibility, no one ever will.

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1. The reference to Kosovo shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)