



HUMAN RIGHTS by GEORGE ABU-ALZULOF

QUESTION: At the beginning, could you please tell me a little about your work? What does the UN and the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights actually do?

ANSWER: At the beginning, I would like to thank you for the invitation. I am George Abu-alzulof. I am Palestinian.

I started my work on human rights in 1992 in a Catholic human rights organization, when I joined Defense for Children International (an international child rights organization based in Geneva). Then I became a director of the Palestinian branch of the organization, from 1998 to 2008. Later, in 2008, I joined the UN children fund, as a child protector specialist and justice for children officer in Yemen. Later, I was a children's rights protector in countries such as Jordan, Irak, Libya etc. In the years 2013-2016 I was an officer of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, representing Yemen. Right now, I am Jamaica's senior human rights advisor. Under my jurisdiction are Jamaica, the Bahamas, Bermuda etc. At the beginning of my career, I briefly studied and worked in a civil society sector, then I moved on to child rights and general human rights.

When I was a child, I was arrested. And that is what motivated me to focus on children's



rights. I was arrested by Israeli occupation forces. It was in 1981. I was a 14-year-old boy who was tortured, abused and beaten. This had a dramatic impact on myself. In those days, there were no conventions on children's rights. It was an extremely difficult experience. I was held against my will for 18 days. After that, I was arrested several times. I spent almost 4 years in prison, without any kind of fair trial. I was a student activist. Just like you. when I was at a university, to assist other students in education. I took part in a demonstration on the right to education. Back then I was not aware that fighting for my right to education would cost me 4 years of my youth spent in prison. That experience helped me realize that our cause should not be about politics or religion, but about human rights. We all believe in equality, justice and freedom as a principle, that is all we do. We do the same everywhere. When I joined the office of the High Commissioner, I was thrilled that issues that in my opinion needed change became part of my work, it became an opportunity to create a better kind of change.

The United Nations has a clear mandate to promote and protect all human rights. The United Nations is built on 3 pillars, development, peace and security and human rights. So human rights are one of the pillars of the UN. The Human Rights declaration starts with article one: everyone is born free, equal in dignity and rights every human being without any kind of distinction or discrimination is entitled to those rights. My work gave me an opportunity to transfer the experience I gained in Palestine, to other countries. North Africa, Caribbean, American continent, the Middle East region, issues related to women, children and so on.

Here in the American region most people die from crime and violence. The reasons might change, depending on a region, but the results are always the same - people are dying. This region has the highest homicide rate and crime rate in the world. It has double of the average number of gender violence and violence against women. It is catastrophic even with existing laws and legislations. Women and girls suffer due to lack of protection systems, awareness and support. We try to create a change. In this situation, to ensure protection of women and girls from violation. Here we

do not have wars, but we have natural disasters. In the Bahamas, it had completely destroyed one island. We started from scratch, we tried to build what was destroyed. If it is a natural disaster or a man made the result is always almost the same. You can see an increase in violations, for example on women and girls after a hurricane, and the same thing happens during wars. If it is a war or a natural disaster, always some specific groups in society are more vulnerable to human rights violations than others. And that is exactly what we do, we work hard to ensure that there is protection, and this protection is equally addressed to everyone, and it is not selective protection.

QUESTION: Human rights, we all know what that is. Cambridge dictionary, for example, defines it as “the basic rights to fair and moral treatment that every person is believed to have”, but could you explain what it actually means? How can we apply human rights in our life?

ANSWER: If you take a look at the convention against torture or discrimination against women, they were drafted by the UN general assembly and approved by consensus. When drafted, they are open for ratification. When a country ratifies a convention, they commit to implement it. This is how it all starts. If any country ratifies or joins a convention, it becomes an obligation to protect, respect and indicate. Each convention has two parts, rights holders and duty bearers.

In the child convention, rights holders are children below the age of 18. So they are entitled to protection under this convention. Duty bearer is the state, including the government, parliament and judicial power. Parents are also included; they are responsible for the upbringing of the child. If you take the convention on eliminating any form of discrimination on women, the right holders are girls and women and the duty ? is the government. Back to your question, there is responsibility on the state that they take all legislative matters, judicial matters and other matters to ensure the implementation of each convention. And if we take for example, women’s participation in political life as a human right, the state should take legalization matters such as allowing women to take part in an election and

nominating themselves. In Saudi Arabia, women still don't have that right. They were given the right to drive just one year ago. Legislation matters are often not enough; there is quite a big possibility that people would not vote for women. So matters such as education, awareness raising etc. should be taken under consideration as well.

If anybody violates your rights, you can access justice. If the judiciary is not independent and fair you would not be able to claim your rights. Here in Jamaica, we have a big issue around sexual violence and rape. Cases are not reported. When victims try to claim their rights, the judicial procedure takes years, and cases are very difficult to prove. So the perpetrators are not held accountable for their actions. If the parliament does not have legislation that has severe penalties on crimes, the problem will continue to happen. The key is responsibility of the state and all its institutes. The participation of all, to ensure that human rights are fulfilled.

Social movements have a major role. You are like watch dogs. You watch and monitor your state and its institutions. If they are not doing a great job you raise your voice. You do advocate, you lobby, you mobilize the street. Go through all the struggle to create this kind of change.

QUESTION: Could you tell us how we, young people that want to make a world a better place, can help in achieving this?

ANSWER: States always tend to find excuses to avoid their obligations. That is why you have a very important role as a movement, as an international community to hold the state accountable. The government has obligations and responsibilities, but it does not always live up to them. And here your role comes, not just the awareness raising, using social media or education - sometimes you have to go to the streets and raise your voice.

Now things are changing, we are struggling for human rights. This is why I think you have a very important role to play. Everyone, youth, old,

women, children need to raise their voice and make their voice heard. Hold people accountable, hold accountable those who deny your rights.

I remember when I was in Palestine's prison, many social movements used to send me letters. And solidarity in those messages played a very important role. I did not feel alone, I felt stronger. Secondly, they sent letters to the Israel's government asking for my release. Any simple step, from any person counts, any letter, any email, believe me, every small step that you take, will create a positive impact. At the end of a day it is not just you alone, there are thousands, millions of people like you, taking these small steps.

This is what always gave me the strength, that you, the young generations are very strong, ambitious, creative and innovative in a way of doing things. As a result, you manage in so many ways to influence word leaders. You keep reminding everyone that you are there and you hold them accountable and they should change.

What brings us all together is much bigger than what divides us. We are stronger when we come together to preside over our rights, our freedom, dignity and mother earth.

QUESTION: Thank you for your answer, I agree with you 100%. I think I can speak for my whole generation by saying that we would do our best in trying to make a world a better place.

Are human rights universal or can they change, for example because of religion? I have in mind Saudi Arabia, their law is based on Qur'an and women there are treated horribly, for example they need permission of a male guardian to fulfill their basic human rights such as education or even health care. Do you think it is our obligation to stop this system or is it understandable, because that's their religion?

ANSWER: Those are just excuses. Human rights are universal, interdependent and mutually enforcing each other.

This discussion took place before 1993; many countries were discussing if human rights are universal. Many of them claimed “human rights are something nice, but it is not applicable in our context”. And it is just not correct. All the Muslim countries and all the eastern, western, north and every other country, voluntarily decide to join a convention or not. Let’s give an example and take into consideration the cultural differences. If you take a look at the Convention of the Rights of the Child, this convention talks about adoption. But adoption in the islamic law is not accepted. They have a kafala system, very similar to the adoption; the difference is that the child will not receive their parents’ family name. If you read this convention it says clearly that the countries that did not apply the adoption system can apply the kafala system. So they give you different choices to apply to your cultural context. But you cannot say that human rights can be applicable in one place and not applicable in the other. As I said, there was this kind of discussion in 1993. On this convention they decided that human rights are universal, interrelated, interconnected and mutually enforcing each other.

Interrelated, interconnected and mutually enforcing, what does this mean? Sometimes people claimed that some rights are more important than the other ones. What do you think is more important, your right to vote or your right to food? Some of them would answer that my right to food is more important than my right to vote, because if I don’t eat I would die. I could live without voting. This type of argument existed for many years. That some human rights are more important. But we said NO. All of them are important, even if you have food, you live, but you have a right to live in dignity. Almost 30 years ago it was discussed and agreed that all the human rights are equal in importance and are applicable everywhere, without any discrimination. And every human being is entitled to these rights.

QUESTION: How can we help people in those countries, when they genuinely think that what is happening in their country is understandable and acceptable? For example, I am working on a project on child labour in

Bangladesh, with people from there. And they think that there is no child labour happening, because a child is choosing to work.

ANSWER: The Convention of the Rights of the Child is not against child labour; it says that a state should establish a minimum age of employment. Most states decided that the age of 15 is the most appropriate. The convention includes some conditions which must be fulfilled in order to legally employ a child. First of all, work does not affect a child's education, second of all it does not affect a child's physical, mental and spiritual development. Third of all, it is not exploitation. If the child works under those conditions it is okay; it is my personal opinion as well. But usually those conditions are not implemented in reality. Most of those children are deprived of the right to education because of labour. Most states do not respect those conditions. They put children in hazardous conditions, often in the chemical and agricultural industry, so it affects their physical wellbeing. They work for long hours, and they don't go to school, deprived from their right to education.

When you look at the context, try to study reasons why something is happening, why do we have high levels of child labour and school dropouts? You will find that there are several social-economic reasons, but the main one is poverty. Those people cannot afford to live. In order to make their living, children need to work. Also, they do not receive enough care and support from the government. I think that there are many ways to stop exploitative child labour and to ensure that children are living in dignity and enjoying their social and economic situation. The first thing is that those countries where people live in poverty, and the government cannot afford dignifying living conditions for all its citizens, needs international support. Secondly, look at the government. Even though they don't receive external support, how do they try to reduce this problem? We need to look at their economic policies. What is the poverty rate in Bangladesh? What is the government doing about it? What are the taxation policies? What kind of economic policies are emplaced to eradicate poverty? You will find that it is a system where the rich become richer and

the poor become poorer. Many people think that charity is a solution. But charity is never a solution. Even if you sent an enormous amount of money it would not solve the problem. Human rights approach is the solution. You need to put an end to the cycle of poverty, not to help a single family or person. You need a comprehensive, strategic human rights approach, not a charitable approach. First you need to insure that the government is doing it the right way. For example, by investing in an education system, not the military. If Bangladesh adopts such policies, but they still have lack of resources, the international organizations have an obligation to help. This is what we are doing here now, in Jamaica and the Caribbean, the government is adopting the budget for Jamaica. The UN and international donors are helping Jamaica to secure enough resources to assist them to eradicate poverty. It is a dual effort: there is an obligation by the international community and there is an obligation by the government itself. As your individual role as a human being you need to monitor the situation and see how you can influence it. You can influence it through support of social activism in Bangladesh. I am sure there are several social movements that are trying to assist. The charitable approach is always there. Speaking for myself, we always collect money. In my kids' school, in my work. There is always a charity that needs a donation or help. It is part of our human nature. But believe me, you do it because you feel with others. This would not solve the problem. The only way to solve it is to influence people in Bangladesh to advocate that the state should change its policies, the government should adopt new approaches and the international community, such as, western countries, should give more support for development collaboration. If you look at the Netherlands, for example, they locate about 1% of its international income for development collaboration. Which is nothing, 1%. But the Netherlands is considered as one of the main donors in this area, highly appreciated. All the millions you hear about, is just this 1%. I'm not criticizing the Netherlands, but what I am saying is that all the money is just 1%, so imagine what would happen if western countries would allocate 2% or more. This would help a lot. It is really important to be aware of your country's allocations. To look

how much they put for international collaborations. And encourage them to locate more. It would help in achieving equality among countries.

QUESTION: Let's move on Covid-19 pandemic, does this unusual situation should or could influence the way we view human rights.?

ANSWER: Yes, I personally think that the pandemic revealed how fragile our systems are. Very fragile. Even in the countries that were considered rich with modern and well-developed health systems. The high number (we are talking about around 2 and half million) of people died as the result of the pandemic. The virus itself doesn't discriminate, but its impact discriminates. There are people that are more vulnerable: the minorities, migrants, people living in extreme poverty, women etc. All they will be disproportionately affected by the pandemic because they are more vulnerable. So, this is one of the main issues revealed by the pandemic: why it doesn't discriminate but its impact discriminates. Secondly because it's revealed how fragile our systems are. All world leaders should commit to rebuild stronger. After the pandemic, to become stronger, we cannot rebuild our societies in the same way they were before. We don't want to remain in square number one, because it already revealed its fragility. And what we need to do now is to more emphasize on the economic and social situation, especially the right to health. Secondly, we need to invest more in research. While the whole world was focusing on technology development, we did not invest enough in the health care system. The pandemic revealed so many things that should open our eyes.

If you take a look at the vaccine, it revealed some shameful results to the global community. We all know that the vaccine is the immunization. It should apply to all because if we are not all protected nobody is protected. This is real, this is a fact. To achieve a full protection for any given society, or for the global community you need to immunize around 70%, I am not a health expert but it is around that. Our goal is to end the pandemic, not to end the pandemic in X and Y countries. I see some countries have now

vaccinated 90% or 60% or 40%. They might have achieved some illusional protection, protection for a period of time for a specific group of people, but this is not sustainable. If not everybody is protected, nobody is protected. What we see now is clear discrimination in the purchasing the vaccines, fair distribution of the vaccines and the vaccination process, despite the initiative created by the UN and many donors contributed for the fair distribution of the vaccine, but still we see there is not enough fairness and equality in this process.

QUESTION: Do you think vaccinations should be mandatory or should it be a choice?

ANSWER: Choice. From the human rights perspective you have a freedom of choice. But how you see, there is a lot of propaganda happening right now. But what is going on, is that this propaganda means that some people try to mobilize the others that the vaccine is dangerous, that they are trying to put chips affecting our minds, so many stories, funny stories sometimes. Those are not true stories, but at the end of the day, from the medical and health rights perspective you have the right to know to know the truth. After that you decide. We expect that you will make responsible decisions, you know what I mean. The responsible decision, if the health professionals, the global health experts, say that for the protection of ourselves and our humanity we have to take the vaccine, we assume that at least the majority of people will be motivated to take it, not just for personal reasons, to protect the communities as well. It's a responsibility but it will never be mandatory. It is always voluntary, vaccinations and things like this are always and will continue to be your freedom of choice and this is guaranteed under your human rights. In any given context, nobody can force you to take the vaccine. As I said, we expect people to be responsible.

QUESTION: I would like to finish with a big and scary question. Do you think universal peace and freedom are even achievable to the human race? Do people have enough compassion to do so?

ANSWER: Is it achievable?

QUESTION: Yes, can we one day live in a world where no one is hungry or struggling in their country. Could it happen?

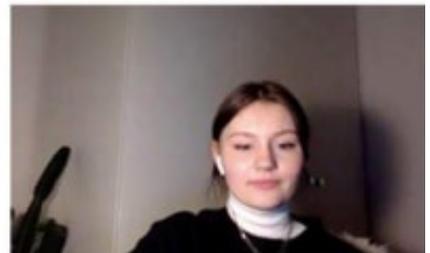
ANSWER: Yes, I am confident on this one, and this is our main motivation. Maybe not in my times but I hope in yours. But since I was young this has been my main belief. When I was in prison, I did not spend my time sitting and just thinking, I spent it studying and reading. I used all my time to study. I read a lot of books on human history that I would probably not have the chance to read outside. But I read a lot about our history. If you take a look at the human history, it all started because whatever we got we shared.

The socio-economic development of mankind passes through several phases. From the first phase when human beings lived like animals, but at least, at the first primitive stage we were all living in equality. There was no “this is for me, not for you”, no private properties. But what happens when you look at today’s socio-economic context many people are frustrated and lose hope that this is how it is, and this is how it will continue to be. And whatever you change, you just make some cosmetic changes here and there, but the ugly face of our reality will stay the same. This is very pessimistic. But I see a light at the end of the tunnel. Peace, justice, equality and human rights will prevail one day. In order to shorten this period of time the more we reach people, educate people, mobilize people, mobilize resources we make this period shorter and shorter, the less we do the longer it will be.

But at the end of the day it is coming, I am confident that it is coming. The world is improving, everything is changing. Changing slowly, but it gives us strong hope, belief and trust that history is on our side. This type of

slavery-like phenomena, because I believe when you talk about human trafficking, abuse, exploitation it is a new face of slavery and we buried the slavery one thousand years ago, but we started to see now new forms of slavery and exploitation. But we will bury it again, and the human socio-economic realities are changing always for the better, and this is the direction of history.

Hundreds of or even fifty years ago nobody was talking about climate change, nobody was talking about preserving our Earth and our nature. But now we are, and we are making every effort. So, it is



changing, slowly yes, but we should always keep the hope alive and mobilize more resources, especially among youth, social movements like your movement, I'm sure with your struggle, dedication and commitment the future of the world will be much better.