

A Summary of United Nations Agreements on Human Rights

Contents

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- Optional Protocol to the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights
- Convention Against Torture
- Convention Against Genocide
- The Geneva Conventions
- Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
- Charter of the United Nations

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The UDHR is the first international statement to use the term "human rights", and has been adopted by the Human Rights movement as a charter. It is short, and worth reading in its entirety

-- a summary would be about as long as the document itself.

Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

This covenant details the basic civil and political rights of individuals and nations.

Among the rights of nations are:

- the right to self determination
- the right to own, trade, and dispose of their property freely, and not be deprived of their means of subsistence.

Among the rights of individuals are:

- the right to legal recourse when their rights have been violated, even if the violator was acting in an official capacity
- the right to life
- the right to liberty and freedom of movement
- the right to equality before the law
- the right to presumption of innocence til proven guilty
- the right to appeal a conviction
- the right to be recognised as a person before the law
- the right to privacy and protection of that privacy by law
- freedom of thought, conscience, and religion
- freedom of opinion and expression
- freedom of assembly and association
- The covenant forbids torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, slavery or involuntary servitude, arbitrary arrest and detention, and debtor's prisons. It forbids propaganda advocating either war or hatred based on race, religion, national origin, or language.

- It provides for the right of people to choose freely whom they will marry and to found a family, and requires that the duties and obligations of marriage and family be shared equally between partners. It guarantees the rights of children and prohibits discrimination based on race, sex, color, national origin, or language.
- It also restricts the death penalty to the most serious of crimes, guarantees condemned people the right to appeal for commutation to a lesser penalty, and forbids the death penalty entirely for people under 18 years of age.
- The covenant permits governments to temporarily suspend some of these rights in cases of civil emergency only, and lists those rights which cannot be suspended for any reason. It also establishes the UN Human Rights Commission.
- After almost two decades of negotiations and rewriting, the text of the Universal Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was agreed upon in 1966. In 1976, after being ratified by the required 35 states, it became international law.

Optional Protocol to the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

The protocol adds legal force to the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by allowing the Human Rights Commission to investigate and judge complaints of human rights violations from individuals from signator countries.

Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

This covenant describes the basic economic, social, and cultural rights of individuals and nations, including the right to:

- self-determination
- wages sufficient to support a minimum standard of living
- equal pay for equal work
- equal opportunity for advancement
- form trade unions
- strike
- paid or otherwise compensated maternity leave
- free primary education, and accessible education at all levels
- copyright, patent, and trademark protection for intellectual property
- In addition, this convention forbids exploitation of children, and requires all nations to cooperate to end world hunger. Each nation which has ratified this covenant is required to submit annual reports on its progress in providing for these rights to the Secretary General, who is to transmit them to the Economic and Social Council.

The text of this covenant was finalised in 1966 along with that of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, but has not been ratified yet.

Convention against Genocide

- This convention bans acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. It declares genocide a crime under international law whether committed during war or peacetime, and binds all signatories of the convention to take measures to prevent and punish any acts of genocide committed within their jurisdiction. The act bans killing of members of any racial, ethnic, national or religious group because of their membership in that group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, inflicting on members of the group conditions of life intended to destroy them, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and taking group members' children away from them and giving them to members of another group.
- It declares genocide itself, conspiracy or incitement to commit genocide, attempts to commit or complicity in the commission of genocide all to be illegal. Individuals are to be held responsible for these acts whether they were acting in their official capacities or as private individuals. Signatories to the convention are bound to enact appropriate legislation to make the acts named in Article 3 illegal under their national law and provide appropriate penalties for violators.
- People suspected of acts of genocide may be tried by a national tribunal in the territory where the acts were committed or by a properly constituted international tribunal whose jurisdiction is recognised by the state or states involved. For purposes of extradition, an allegation of genocide is not to be considered a political crime, and states are bound to extradite suspects in accordance with national laws and treaties. Any state party to the Convention may also call upon the United Nations to act to prevent or punish acts of genocide.
- The remainder of the Convention specifies procedures for resolving disputes between nations about whether a specific act or acts constitute(s) genocide, and gives procedures for ratification of the convention.

Convention against Torture

- This convention bans torture under all circumstances and establishes the UN Committee against Torture. In particular, it defines torture, requires states to take effective legal and other measures to prevent torture, declares that no state of emergency, other external threats, nor orders from a superior officer or authority may be invoked to justify torture. It forbids countries to return a refugee to his country if there is reason to believe he/she will be tortured, and requires host countries to consider the human rights record of the person's native country in making this decision.
- The CAT requires states to make torture illegal and provide appropriate punishment for those who commit torture. It requires states to assert jurisdiction when torture is committed within their jurisdiction, either investigate and prosecute themselves, or upon proper request extradite suspects to face trial before another competent court. It also requires states to cooperate with any civil proceedings against accused torturers.
- Each state is obliged to provide training to law enforcement and military on torture prevention, keep its interrogation methods under review, and promptly investigate any allegations that its officials have committed torture in the course of their official duties. It must ensure that individuals who allege that someone has committed torture against them are permitted to make an official complaint and have it investigated, and, if the complaint is proven, receive compensation, including full medical treatment and payments to survivors if the victim dies as a result of

torture. It forbids states to admit into evidence during a trial any confession or statement made during or as a result of torture. It also forbids activities which do not rise to the level of torture, but which constitute cruel or degrading treatment.

- The second part of the Convention establishes the Committee Against Torture, and sets out the rules on its membership and activities.
- The Convention was passed and opened for ratification in February, 1985. At that time twenty nations signed, and five more signed within the month. At present sixty five nations have ratified the Convention against torture and sixteen more have signed but not yet ratified it.

Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women

- This convention bans discrimination against women. The copy of the Convention on Women presently accessible through this page is a fully- indexed HTML document.

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Convention on the Rights of the Child

- This convention bans discrimination against children and provides for special protection and rights appropriate to minors. The copy of the Convention on the Rights of the Child presently accessible through this page is a fully-indexed HTML document.

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Charter of the United Nations

- The Charter of the United Nations contains some important human rights provisions, in addition to containing the framework for the organisation as a whole. This is a fully indexed HTML version of the charter.