

Press release
Geneva Lecture Series

More than 1,000 people attended the Second Geneva Lecture on the question “Are Human Rights Universal?”, held at the Palais des Nations in Geneva on Wednesday 10 December 2008 to mark Human Rights Day and the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In his opening remarks, UNOG Director-General Sergei A. Ordzhonikidze stressed that the theme of the campaign launched a year ago by the Secretary-General, “*Dignity and justice for all of us,*” reinforces the vision of the Declaration as a commitment to universal dignity and justice. He also emphasized, however, that the promises of the Declaration remain unfulfilled for too many people around the world and called on all present to redouble efforts to make the principles of the Declaration a reality for all.

Two Nobel Prize laureates and prominent defenders of human rights were invited to address the public. Shirin Ebadi, 2003 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate defended forcefully the universality of human rights and criticized abuses perpetrated by some in the name of religion or ideology. Citing the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Ms. Ebadi noted that peace and security can be ensured only by the observance of human rights and called for an “International Convention to Combat Poverty” to be drawn up and presented to the United Nations General Assembly for adoption. The most important point to be addressed in this Convention would be to encourage States to reduce their military spending, so as to ensure that public funds in every country are spent on welfare rather than the purchase and stockpiling of weapons.

Wole Soyinka, 1986 Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature, criticized “cultural relativism” as a “trap” and a “cunning device” meant to “breed an attitude that legitimizes any form of conduct, as long as it can be attributed to cultural usage”. Mr. Soyinka added: “What circumstances of birth, upbringing, opportunities and environment make of each is a different matter, but cannot be considered fundamental to the worth and validity of each individual, and thus to his or her entitlements from, and responsibility to, the rest of society”.

Following the lectures, an open discussion with the audience of representatives of the diplomatic community, organizations of the United Nations system, non-governmental organizations, research and academic community, private sector, as well as students and interested individuals, was moderated by Xavier Colin, producer and presenter of the Geopolitis programme on Television Suisse Romande.

In closing remarks, H.S.H. Prince Albert II of Monaco stressed that universality is not simply one of the characteristics of human rights but their core principle. When human rights are under attack, he said, the whole of humankind suffers.

Background

Organized by the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), the Geneva Lecture Series was inaugurated in April 2008 by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban Ki-moon. The objective of the Geneva Lecture Series is to raise public awareness of global challenges and to engage prominent intellectual figures, leaders from the world of business, politics and civil society leaders as well as the general public in Geneva and beyond into a process of reflection on what can and should be done to address such challenges.