

Scene set for new declaration on human rights

By CHARLES TALBOT

DURING the month of June, Vienna came alive with the buzz of voluntary human rights groups whose formidable legions poured into the Austrian capital by the plane load, train load and even car load. The event was the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights which brought together government representatives from around the globe.

In addition to the government representatives, the conference accommodated the input of a broad range of human rights organisations and activists representing every continent. They agitated for such things as an International Penal Court to try gross violations of human rights; a Special UN Commissioner for Human Rights who would have the authority for speedy action; a special rapporteur on women – the world's single largest most discriminated against group; ratification of the Conventions on Torture and the Rights of the Child, and an improved UN capacity for fact-finding and more rapid response in emergencies.

In addition, there has been a blossoming network of voluntary human rights groups which has strengthened their impact – not just the well-known networks such as Amnesty International and America Watch, but also small organisations like the Thai Union for Civil Liberty, the Task Force Detainees, Phillipines and Kosovo Human Rights Watch. There were 300 of these from Asia alone.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights set out to ensure that both civil and political human rights were protected. However, with global political changes, moves away from colonialism and the later collapse of the USSR, global governance is no longer an exercise just for governments. Civil societies have actively entered social, cultural, economic and political fields once reserved for the traditional citizen-party-government-state chain.

These civil societies are pushing towards a wider interpretation of the declaration, and the creation of more effective mechanisms by which rights can be protected. The indivisibility of all human rights, including civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights was reiterated.

An international covenant accepting the universality of human rights, would have a far-reaching impact on the nature of governance around the world. As a result, the Vienna conference opened up a number of key debates in the field. These included questions raised about the universality of all human rights; the extent to which these would impact on national self-determination; the delivery and resourcing of economic and social rights; the relationship between development, democracy and human rights, and finally the type of institutional reform needed to empower the UN to effectively deal with human rights violations around the world.

Although this conference did not conclude with consensus on new human rights or mechanisms of enforcement, it was far from a failure. It has significantly advanced the debate and created an instrument of communication and dialogue. It provided a context within which governments, organisations and activists can endeavour to define and implement a new declaration on human rights in the future.

Charles Talbot is a regional co-ordinator in Idasa's Durban office.

Not one of the boys?

The new Equal Opportunity Officer at the University of Cape Town is a white man. Some have wondered whether his appointment to a post aimed at tackling affirmative action at UCT, is not something of a contradiction in terms. SHAUNA WESTCOTT investigated.

THERE'S a story that did the rounds in the suburbs on the politically correct (pc) side of Table Mountain after Frank Molteno was appointed Equal Opportunity Officer at the University of Cape Town in November last year. It went like this: Molteno's new boss, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Mamphela Ramphele, was asked what she thought she was doing appointing a white boy to the equal opportunity post. "We didn't appoint a white boy," she replied, "we appointed Frank Molteno."

This is an elegant (not to say pc) way for the deputy vice-chancellor to duck the issue, but it doesn't matter that Molteno is exceptional: the University of Cape Town would have looked more serious about its commitment to equal opportunity had it employed a woman or a black man for the position.

It's like what the university persists in calling "ad hominem" promotions, despite the commitment to non-sexism which one could be forgiven for inferring from the existence, however brief, of a Senate Committee on Sexism (on which Molteno served). "Ad hominem", for the benefit of those who did not suffer through school Latin, means literally "towards the man". The intention is to refer to appointments made not to fill vacancies but to advance, well, the man.

That it is the advancement of men that is the concern, is evident from the figures: a report in the UCT *Monday Paper* for 19 to 26 July reveals that of the 14 "ad hominem" promotions to associate professor made for 1993, 10 are men. (That 13 of the 14 are white suggests that "hominem" also excludes "black man".)

Molteno's comment on this state of affairs was that "it's very, very early days still", and that at least some women (and one black man) were promoted. He did marshal an impressive array of statistics illustrating that "there are objective, material conditions which give rise to this", but he finally admitted with some irritation both that "the whole system of so-called ad hominem promotions is unsatisfactory" and that he has to "be careful publicly about not coming out and causing an uproar".

This is perhaps the deputy vice-chancellor's point: UCT has employed itself a person immensely capable of winning friends and influencing people.

The fact that Molteno comes from good old liberal stock probably helps, although he dismisses his more famous ancestors, including the first prime minister of the Cape, as having absolutely nothing to do with him. His father Donald – who served in the