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Words that kill

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights celebrated its 75th anniversary on 10 December this year. Dehumanisation poses a threat to the continued protection of these essential rights.

Photo: Einar Nilsen

'... We [...] learned that many of the German mass attacks were made by boys, [...] arm in arm [...]'

The above quote is taken from the website 'Voices of the First World War', which is a collection of audio recordings from those who experienced the war and those who fought in it (1). On Christmas Day 1914, a spontaneous truce took place, initiated by the troops. They climbed out of their trenches and into no man's land, where they sang Christmas carols, talked about the battles they had been through (on each side), exchanged food and buried the dead. The truce is said to have lasted for about a day and a half before the soldiers were sternly ordered to return to the trenches and stop fraternising with the enemy. It would probably have become too difficult to continue shooting if they got too well acquainted, or saw each other as fellow human beings.

The world would go through yet another major war (and many smaller ones) before the UN adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (2). The aim was to create a common understanding that people are born with a set of rights – for no other reason than that they are human. The Human Rights Commission, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962) and with representatives from all continents, worked for two years before reaching an agreement on the wording. One of the representatives was Hansa Mehta (1897–1995), who succeeded in her attempts for the word 'human' to be used instead of 'man'.

As we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the declaration on 10 December this year, the concept of human rights is well established. Nevertheless, the world is under a dark cloud. Two wars are playing out simultaneously on our screens and over the heads and into the homes of people in not too distant lands. There are also other wars going on in the world. Democracy is under threat in many places, and authoritarian leaders seem to be gaining ground in a growing number of democratic nations.

From a broad perspective, there is still a lot to be happy about. Many positive things have occurred in the last 75 years, and even more if we go further back in history. On a human rights index scale, where 0 is the lowest level and 1 means that most rights are protected, the score has increased from 0.26 in 1789, via 0.38 in 1948 to 0.67 at the last measurement in 2022 (3). The figures from Our World in Data are therefore a real wake-up call for those who think that the world was better before and has declined in the last decade. The world map illustrating how well citizens are protected against, for instance, state torture, political killings and mass executions, also has many alarming signals (3). People are still allowing these things to happen to other people. Why?

The explanation can be found, at least in part, in human emotions: fear, anger and primarily disgust (4). These are drivers of dehumanisation, thinking of 'the others' as something other than human. Because if they (others) are not human, then they have no entitlement to rights. We are designed to feel disgust for what we cannot tolerate, such as spoiled food and vermin. And precisely by using terms such as 'vermin' for human beings or groups of human beings, authoritarian leaders can rally the people to join them in defending the most horrific abuses.

> ***«And precisely by using terms such as 'vermin' for human beings or groups of human beings, authoritarian leaders can rally the people to join them in defending the most horrific abuses»***

The best-known example of this is from World War II, where the Nazis referred to Jews as rats, lice, cockroaches and vultures (5). However, it is also relevant today: Donald Trump, the man who could win the most important democratic election in the world next year, recently called his political opponents vermin and pledged to 'crush' them (6). The Israeli defence forces have referred to Palestinians as animals, leading to major protests both in Israel and from Jews around the world (7-9). Standing Together, a grassroots political movement of Jewish and Palestinian citizens living in Israel, spends much of its time specifically washing away war-mongering slogans and replacing them with 'Equality for all' (8). Dehumanisation is also fuelled by distance. If the enemy lives too close, authorities can put up walls, barbed wire and checkpoints to prevent people from meeting each other. Just like on the battlefields.

The antidote to dehumanisation is getting to know each other and acquainting ourselves with 'the others'.

The hope for Christmas and the New Year must be that the story from World War I repeats itself and leads to something other than more years of war. Weapons must be laid down, whether they be rifles or inhumane words, and we

must all see who those others really are: people like us, arm in arm.

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