

Human Rights Panel Explores Implementation of Rights and Global Well-Being

By Jan Jekielek, Epoch Times Staff
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Dr. Elizabeth Carll (L), President, CCCUN, who moderated the human rights panel, watches on as the World Bank Group's Yuvan Beejadhur (C) answers a question. To his right is international human rights lawyer Ugoji Eze, accredited to practice law in the U.K. and Nigeria. (Jan Jekielek/The Epoch Times)

NEW YORK—In anticipation of the 2010 Human Rights Day, a diverse array of human rights experts in New York City weighed in on some of the key human rights issues facing the world today.

The panel, held at the United Nations Church Center at United Nations Plaza, covered a diverse range of topics including women's rights, access to water and sanitation, international human rights law, media freedom, and the rights of persons with disabilities.

Press Freedom and Civilians in Armed Conflict

Among the six panelists, international human rights lawyer Ugoji Eze tackled the perennial issue of civilians in conflict situations. “It is imperative to follow up the issue of explosive weapons,” she said, in particular reference to drone attacks on civilians.

Recently, Pakistan refused to expand the range of U.S. drone over-flights. One interpretation is that this was due to Pakistani government fears of a backlash among the civilian populations living in the proposed regions.

Epoch Times Editor-in-Chief John Nania underscored the need for accountability and independence in today's media.

“With media having such a broad impact, being able to spread their message so widely, there is a ... great potential for building an accurate picture of what's happening in the world, and also there's a great potential for manipulation of information and deceiving people,” he said. He added that journalists often pay the price for exposing human rights violations, highlighting the *Epoch Times* reporters jailed in China.

“*It appears to me that in the international community, that economic obligations supersede human rights obligations. —Ugoji Eze*”

Dr. Elizabeth Carll, President of the Communications Coordination Committee for the United Nations (CCCUN) and moderator of the event, described journalists as “the forgotten emergency workers who are on the front line” when human rights are being trampled.

When it comes to bilateral country relations, both Eze and Nania agreed that human rights issues usually take a back seat to economic interests. “It appears to me that in the international community, that economic obligations supersede human rights obligations, in international public law, particularly of the United Nations,” said Eze.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Also speaking on the panel was Robert Nagel, the Chief Technology Officer of the CCCUN, and perennial advocate for the rights of blind persons at the U.N. Nagel, who is blind himself. He expounded on the remarkable accomplishment that is the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the 21st century’s first U.N. human rights convention.

He offered some insight into the development of the convention, explaining that to his knowledge this was the first treaty where civil society representatives, including himself, were invited to the “informal sessions” at the U.N., where countries work out their differences behind closed doors to achieve agreement when the regular meetings fail.



Robert Nagel, the Chief Technology Officer of the CCCUN, and perennial advocate for the rights of blind persons at the U.N. speaks about the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (Jan Jekielek/The Epoch Times)

The convention was about “not just the rights, but rights and dignity,” said Nagel, emphasizing that the document makes clear that “people with disabilities are not disabled people: they’re people first, [but] with disabilities.”

Women’s Rights

A range of contemporary human rights violations relate to women in particular, said panelist Virginia Caraway, a women’s rights advocate from Florida State College at Jacksonville. One issue that she focused on was ritual genital mutilation of women in several countries, in particular in Africa.

“The procedure is done without anesthesia and each woman is not given any say, because they start with little children, four years to 15 years old,” said Caraway.

In societies that practice female genital mutilation, women who don't undergo the procedure often have trouble finding husbands, as the practice is the norm, and it is commonly believed that women who have undergone the procedure will be less likely to seek sex outside of marriage. Genital mutilation leads to a host of health problems and, in many cases, constant pain for victim.

"We need to outlaw this worldwide," said Caraway. "It's imperative that education at the grassroots level take place."

Susanne Schmidt, a water governance specialist with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), focused on access to water and sanitation on the panel, but also delved into women's rights in particular. Close to a billion people still don't have access to safe drinking water, she said, with many people suffering their whole lives from waterborne diseases. What is less obvious is that this also creates gender inequalities.

"Mostly women and young girls collect water for their families, said Schmidt. "The time they have to spend doing that, they can't spend on getting an education."

A Hopeful Note

While noting that human right violations exist all over the world, panelist Yuvan Beejadhur, a counselor with the World Bank Group, said that it's essential to identify the progress that has been made.

"We have to identify who [the] ambassadors of hope and ambassadors of change are ... We know Martin Luther King, we know Mahatma Ghandi, we know the Nobel peace prize winners, but there are so many like them, we have to be able to identify them and show their work to the world."

The event, titled "Cross Cutting Issues in Human Rights and Global Well-Being," was hosted by the CCCUN, which has as its mission to support the U.N. and its agencies by facilitating communication among U.N.-accredited nongovernmental organizations, nonprofits, and interested business enterprises, according to the committee's website. It is geared toward building "a peaceful, sustainable and high quality of life for all in the global community."

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