

Editorial / Issue Three 2004

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This Issue is the last for 2004. It has been a fitting year to launch a journal on Human Rights in the Asia Pacific. A year that saw an escalation of terrorism and the concomitant increase in measures against the threat of terrorism, a year where an American President and an Australian Prime Minister won elections on issues of fear. These escalations remind me a South African short story by Nadine Gordimer where a young white couple, so afraid of the threat of black South Africans who might endanger their precious young son's safety, built more and more brutal fences, razor wired and electrified. Only to come home one day to the sight of their son caught upon their protective defence, electrocuted by their fear.

In this still relatively new century where events have grown increasingly connected, we have seen the emergence of discourses that divide the world unproblematically into good and evil. The idea of this divide grows and it is a gradually more dangerous one for the Asia Pacific Region. The costs of such a binary simplification is a recession into a darker age. And the result is an unstable sense of security, the maintenance of which is at the cost of lives lost and human rights curtailed.

As an anthropologist I am keenly aware of the impact of past colonialisms on the Third and Fourth Worlds, and in my darker moments it strikes me forcibly that now is less an era of growing democracy than increasingly an era that bears the mark of new imperialisms, of violent expansion powered by capitalism and to a series of 'ends justify the means' wars.

Yet, the advances made in human rights cannot be swept away so readily, as the writers who have taken part in this journal have demonstrated; we can examine what is happening and act upon those examinations.

In an age where we are drenched with information, we are in more danger than ever of being uninformed. We replace channel surfing for learning, and depend upon a media that is increasingly unvigilant and craven to larger economic concerns, aware more of litigation than information. Kang Sangjung's article reminds us that relations between states and between individuals is not only a product of government negotiations. The role of the media increasingly shapes how we imagine each other and the rest of the world. In the case of Japan the role the media plays in fostering or debunking prejudices surrounding North Korea and North Koreans is crucial. The attitudes developed and shaped by media and government discourse have a significant impact upon the treatment of the Korean minority within Japan.

The various wars and human rights violations in the name of 'tougher measures' have not led to greater security or safety. Natarajan & Lakshman reveal protective measures, such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) in India has meant a possibility of a reduction in security and safety for ordinary citizens, with ambiguities in the legislation opening possible loopholes for forced confession and the abuse of rights.

Jane Keogh talks about her views on politics, refugees and Australia. The interview reveals a picture of a compassionate citizen fighting for what is fundamental: The right for all humans to be treated with care and respect. This interview with Jane reveals what is underneath the surface of the image that most Australians have of Australia; of a country that assumes it has a high standard of human rights, and a culture of honesty and a fair go for all, an image that in reality has been worn away by a succession of petty and greater injustices.

A country's spirit is truly exposed at the point of contact with those who are the least within its borders. Whether it is North Koreans within Japan, Asylum Seekers in Australia, or Indian Nationals caught up in the state's protective measures. How they are treated, how they are received and how they are forgotten, says more about the nation than how the most powerful or popular are treated. The forgotten or uncared for suffering of a refugee in Australian detention camp says more about Australian character than Kathy Freeman winning gold, or 'our' Nicole Kidman getting an Oscar. We are all of us only as great as the least amongst us and are all connected as humans, with or without a bureaucracy's say so.

Perhaps those niggling fears will be if not put to rest, put to use through getting to know our neighbour, nation and individual. This is the key strength and challenge of *AsiaRights*, to reach out and build networks that inform challenge and connect people and groups in the Asia Pacific. Knowledge in and of it self never killed anyone, but it has frequently been the death of prejudice.

About the author

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