

Human Rights Timeline: Select Key Events

Timeline

2017

Overview

This timeline accompanies a three-video series on health and human rights by human rights attorney, Alicia Ely Yamin. It lists only events highlighted in the video narrative. Further information about additional human rights documents pertinent to the themes discussed in the videos are available in an accompanying annotated bibliography. Some of the descriptions below are partly informed by and adapted from the “Human Rights Timeline” published by The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project at the George Washington University, archived at:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170117185443/https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/humanrights/timeline>.

Timeline

1939–1945

World War Two: Human rights violations increasingly become an international concern related to the atrocities of the Nazi era in Germany under Adolf Hitler.

1945

The **United Nations (UN)** is established, emphasizing the principle of individual human rights. The Charter of the UN states that one of the primary purposes of the UN is the promotion and encouragement of "respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion."

1947–1991

The **Cold War** is a period of political tension and intentional non-cooperation following World War II, between communist nations closely allied with the Soviet Union, and the West, particularly the United States.

1948

The UN General Assembly adopts the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, the primary international articulation of the fundamental and inalienable rights of all human beings and the first comprehensive agreement among nations with regards to the specific rights and freedom of all human beings.

1964

Nelson Mandela and seven other leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) are sentenced to life in prison by the South African government for protesting the apartheid policies in South Africa.

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1966

The UN adopts and opens for signature the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)** and the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)**. Together these documents further developed the rights outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

1976

The **ICCPR** and **ICESCR** take effect after ratification by UN Member States.

1981

The disease that would become known as **HIV/AIDS is first identified** and develops into a global pandemic throughout the 1990s.

1980s–1990s

A movement emerges to incorporate **human rights in domestic affairs** in national constitutions around the world.

1989

The Cold War begins to thaw and the **Berlin Wall**, between East and West Berlin, is dismantled.

1990

Nelson Mandela is released after 27 years in prison, when South Africa's President F.W. de Klerk lifts the ban on the ANC and other anti-apartheid organizations.

1990s

An increasing focus on **sexual and reproductive rights** develops.

1991

The **Soviet Union is formally dissolved** into independent republics.

1993

The Second World Conference on Human Rights convenes in Vienna, where the **Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action** is adopted.

1994

The International Conference on Population and Development in **Cairo (ICPD) Programme of Action** affirms the relationship between gender equality and economic development.

1995

The **Beijing Declaration** at the World Conference on Women declares that “women's rights are human rights.” The Platform for Action designed at the conference contains dozens of references to human rights pertaining to women.

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1995–1996

The successful development of **antiretroviral (ARV) therapy** makes it possible to treat HIV/AIDS as a lifelong chronic, rather than inevitably fatal, disease. Due to high cost of the medication, debates begin over the cost-effectiveness of such treatment, particularly in low-income countries.

2002

The United Nations **Millennium Development Goals** are commissioned by the United Nations Secretary-General, to develop a concrete action plan to “alleviate extreme poverty by 2015.”

2003

The United Nations adopts a public statement to promote a **human rights-based approach to development** for UN agencies involved in global and regional development efforts.

2010

United Nations Secretary-General launches the **Global Strategy for Women’s and Children’s Health**. In 2015, the Strategy is updated to include adolescent health, and published as part of the multi-stakeholder *Every Woman Every Child* movement, to help end preventable deaths and ensure well-being within a generation.

2015

The Millennium Development Goals are concluded, and the United Nations launches the **Sustainable Development Goals** (2016-2030).

2016

Donald Trump is elected as President of the United States, and in the United Kingdom a national vote to withdraw from membership in the European Union (“Brexit”) marks a global **politically conservative shift** in the English-speaking West.