

Introduction

Anyone may bring a human rights problem to the attention of the United Nations and thousands of people around the world do this every year. What kinds of communications on human rights can the United Nations receive, and how does it deal with them? This fact sheet explains the procedures, and the ways open to individuals and groups who want the United Nations to take action on a human rights situation that is of concern to them.

From the beginning . . .

When it met for the first time in 1947, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights saw that procedures for handling communications would be needed. The procedures established since then have been improved and widened in scope over the years. The fact that they exist and are frequently used is a powerful arm in promoting respect for human rights and in deterring abuses.

In 1959 the United Nations Economic and Social Council decided that a confidential list of communications to the United Nations complaining of human rights violations should be distributed to the Commission on Human Rights and to the United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities.¹ The identity of the authors is not revealed unless they state they have no objection to disclosure. Governments of States referred to in the communications receive copies, and their replies are also sent to the Commission on Human Rights.

The Economic and Social Council, in 1967, authorized the Commission on Human Rights and the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities to "examine information relevant to gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms . . . in all countries". The Council decided that the Commission could, in appropriate cases, "make a

¹ Economic and Social Council resolution 728 F (XXVIII) of 30 July 1959.