GREAT DECISIONS
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TEACHERS: CHECK OUT THE BACK PAGE

NOVEMBER 2026

HUMAN RIGHTS



WHAT ARE THEY?

WHO ENFORCES THEM?

A GLOBAL ISSUE

SHIFTING BELIEFS

BY JOEL SNYDER



FDR Presidential Library and Museum

FREEDOM AND DIGNITY FOR ALL

Former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt holds up the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which serves as an accepted set of guidelines for human rights around the world. Roosevelt was the chair of the UN committee that created the document.

What would you do if you lost your freedom to say what you want or practice the religion of your choice? What if you could be thrown in jail for your religious beliefs or because of your race? What if the government could take you out of your home at any moment? Many people take protection from this kind of treatment for granted. But at many times in history, in places around the world, different groups of people have seen **human rights** violations.

In some cases, governments are accused of committing abuses against their own people. In others, they are said to be unfairly oppressing the people of neighboring countries or occupied territories. But what exactly are human rights? And who guarantees that these rights will be upheld?

Broadly speaking, human rights are those guaranteed to all people,

regardless of who they are or where they come from. What these rights are and how they should be enforced has been a matter of debate for thousands of years. Most can agree that people should be able to live in freedom and dignity. But these are terms that can mean different things to different people and in different contexts.

Because there is no single world government, it has always been difficult to ensure that these rights extend beyond national borders. Governments and military forces often treat the people of other countries and cultures different from their own. And even within the borders of a nation, the same rights are not always guaranteed to all people.

"A SPIRIT OF BROTHERHOOD"

Today, the most widely accepted definition of human rights comes from a document called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration was adopted by the **United Nations** (UN) in 1948, and it is made up of thirty articles outlining the fundamental rights that belong to all people. For example, it states that all people should be free from discrimination based on race, religion, nationality, or political beliefs. It declares torture and slavery to be prohibited in all situations. It also guarantees that all people be treated fairly under the laws of their nations. The overall guiding principle of the document is that all people "should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

By declaring human rights "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations," the Declaration reached beyond what was being practiced in most democracies at the time and created a set of expectations for all nations to aim toward. In the decades since it was adopted, it has had a major impact on global events.

Almost every one of the world's countries is a member of the United Nations, which means the concepts of the Declaration are expected to apply throughout the world. However, the Declaration itself is not a legally binding document, and the UN is not a government. Many times, countries are forced to respect human rights only after other, more powerful countries step in to negotiate and enforce agreements.

STEPPING IN

Large, powerful countries called **superpowers** are often at the center of enforcing human rights issues around the world. This is because they have enough wealth and military power to persuade other countries to comply with international agreements. At the time the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, the world's major superpowers were the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. But by the end of the 20th century, the United States stood alone as the world's dominant force. Today, China is rising toward a level of power similar to that of the US. But China takes a very different view of human rights than the US.

Governments that make a point of stepping in to address the conduct of other nations are said to practice **interventionist** foreign policy. Those that avoid dealing with foreign problems in order to focus on domestic issues are said to practice **isolationist** foreign policy. Historically, the United States has taken an interventionist stance on many issues around the world, including human rights violations. But even a nation as powerful as the United States must pick and choose how to intervene. It can't

THE DEBATE

SHOULD THE US TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR PROTECTING HUMAN RIGHTS ABROAD?

YES

- ✓ The US is the only country powerful enough to make a difference in some situations
- ✓ It is the morally correct thing to do
- ✓ Setting a good example encourages other nations to follow suit

NO

- ✗ Tax dollars are better spent on domestic issues that benefit US citizens
- ✗ Human rights abuses are the responsibility of international organizations, not individual nations
- ✗ Intervening in foreign issues only leads to new problems



Kenishirotie/Dreamstime.com

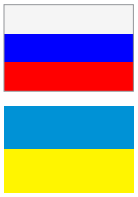
solve every problem on the planet, and it must be careful about how it approaches different situations. The wrong kind of action could end up making a situation worse or create new problems. For example, getting involved in the wrong dispute could sour relations with an important ally or provoke an enemy into retaliation.

There is also the question of politics at home. Not all Americans want to see the country's resources being used to address problems in faraway nations. If leaders make the wrong decisions, they could find voters turning against them. As conflicts erupt around the world, each raises new questions about the importance of human rights and what role the US should play in preserving them.



Steven Garcia/NurPhoto/AP Images

A US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officer makes an arrest. Many people have criticized ICE's forceful tactics in 2025 and 2026 as human rights violations, kicking off a wave of protests around the country.



RUSSIA AND UKRAINE: INVADING A NEIGHBORING NATION

In 2022, Russia began a military invasion of the neighboring country of Ukraine. The two countries have a shared cultural history, and Russian president Vladimir Putin believes that Ukraine should be part of Russia. The people of Ukraine do not agree—they believe they are an independent nation.

Russia has been accused of targeting Ukrainian civilians in its attacks. It has bombed hospitals and attacked Ukraine's energy infrastructure, leaving huge numbers of people without power. It has also been accused of torturing prisoners and executing them without trial. These are just some of the human rights violations that Russia has been charged with since the beginning of the conflict.

The US has provided significant aid to Ukraine, spending almost 200 billion dollars as of 2026 to provide the Ukrainian military with weapons and accepting Ukrainian **refugees**. In addressing this situation, the US has had to walk a careful line, offering crucial support to Ukraine while avoiding provoking Putin into escalating the conflict or even attacking the United States.



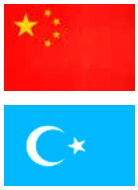
ISRAEL AND PALESTINE: HUMAN RIGHTS IN GAZA

For decades, there has been a bloody battle for control of the land that makes up Israel and Palestine. Tensions escalated to a new level in October 2023, when members of the Palestinian militant group Hamas launched an attack on southern Israel, killing almost 1,200 Israeli citizens and taking more than 250 hostages. Most of the victims were civilians.

In retaliation, Israel began an assault on the area of land known as the Gaza Strip. This area is governed by Hamas, but it is also home to around two million Palestinian civilians. In its attacks, Israel has been accused of deliberately disrupting supplies of food, water, and power and targeting hospitals, devastating Gaza's civilian population.

Many countries have condemned Israel's actions as being disproportionate to the initial

attacks by Hamas. They have also criticized Israel for human rights violations against civilians. But the US occupies a complicated position. Israel is an important ally, and the US continues to provide it with substantial military aid. At the same time, it also funds **humanitarian** aid to the people of Gaza.



CHINA AND THE UYGHURS: PERSECUTING MINORITIES

China's government has been accused of violating the the human rights of its own people. These situations can be even more difficult to address than those arising as a result of international conflict. For more than a decade, the Chinese government has been accused of abusing the human rights of the Uyghurs, a Muslim minority group who live in an area of northwest China. The Uyghurs have been subject to mass detainment, forced labor, and torture, all because of their ethnic background. The Chinese government has even been accused of attempted **genocide** against the Uyghurs.

The US and other countries

THE DEBATE

ARE THE RECENT ACTIONS OF ICE AN EXAMPLE OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS?

YES

- ✓ Unlike other police, ICE agents are using masks to hide their faces and refusing to properly identify themselves
- ✓ ICE is using an improper amount of force
- ✓ ICE is targeting and attacking legal residents of the country, including US citizens

NO

- ✗ ICE needs to be able to use all possible methods to do its job properly
- ✗ People should not be in the country illegally
- ✗ US citizens should not be interfering with law enforcement



Ringo Chiu/Shutterstock



Artur Widak/NurPhoto/AP Images

Canadian Uyghurs protest China's treatment of the Uyghur people in 2024. The issue has drawn attention from people around the world.



Aaron Schwartz/SIPA USA/AP Images

Protesters gather in Washington, DC, in 2025 to protest cuts to USAID. Many Americans support foreign aid spending, arguing that it helps foster peace around the world.

around the world, along with the UN, have condemned these practices and called for investigations and **sanctions** against the Chinese government. However, China has denied most of the allegations. Because it is a large superpower, China is not easily persuaded by outside forces to change its ways. It does not rely on foreign countries for aid, and other countries do not want to risk turning it into an enemy. Even a country as powerful as the United States cannot exert too much force in this situation, as doing so could lead to conflict.

THE DEBATE

SHOULD THE US BE A REFUGE FOR PEOPLE IN DANGER BY PROVIDING TPS?

YES

- ✓ Our identity as a refuge for immigrants is what has helped make us a great nation
- ✓ These refugees frequently have nowhere else to go
- ✓ Granting TPS allows refugees to work hard and contribute to US society while they are here

NO

- ✗ Allowing people from dangerous countries past the border poses a danger to US citizens
- ✗ TPS recipients are largely low-income and undereducated
- ✗ Taking in refugees only encourages other countries to continue violating their citizens' human rights



Dragance137/Dreamstime.com

CHANGING ATTITUDES

The United States has also supported human rights through broad programs that can provide aid to people in need. For example, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) was established in 1961. It was created to provide economic aid to people in low-income countries. Throughout its history, it has helped fund disaster relief, educational programs, healthcare, and food assistance in countries around the world. By its own estimate, USAID saved more than 90 million lives between the years of 2001 and 2021 alone—around one-third of them being children younger than five.

In 1990, with **bipartisan** support, the government established a program allowing refugees to receive **Temporary Protected Status** (TPS) in the US. TPS was created to protect people fleeing their home nations due to armed conflict, persecution, environmental disasters, or other extraordinary circumstances. For more than 35 years, it has granted foreign citizens the right to stay in the US for a period of 6, 12, or 18 months after leaving their home countries.

During his time in office, President Donald Trump has

pursued significant cuts to these and similar programs. In February 2025, Trump also announced that the US was withdrawing from the UN Human Rights Council. Under Trump's leadership, the country has also stopped granting TPS status to people from twelve nations, with the potential of more to come. For those already in the US, losing TPS status will put them in danger of being deported back to their home countries. Hundreds of thousands of people could be affected.

These decisions reflect a major shift in the role the United States aims to occupy in the global order. The impact will be felt around the world. Many countries have come to rely on aid from the United States to keep people fed and prevent common diseases from spreading. And the United States may no longer be a safe haven for those fleeing disaster and oppression in their home countries.

As the United States moves forward, many nations around the world are watching to see what role the nation will play in the continued reinforcement of common human rights standards internationally. For decades, the US has been a pillar of many international agreements that have provided the expectations in international conflicts, and as the nation moves away from those agreements, it is an open question what the international order will look like.

WHAT *YOU* CAN DO

- **Educate yourself** on current human rights issues. Follow the news using reliable sources such as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and National Public Radio to understand and track human rights concerns around the world.
- **Build public knowledge** around human rights. Teach family members and other voters about why these issues should matter in the American political system, using resources from advocacy organizations like Amnesty International to understand how legislators can better advocate for the protection of human rights.
- **Communicate** with your legislators about TPS or USAID. Build and sustain relationships with the people who represent you on each level of government and communicate to them why human rights are important. Local and state governments can play an important role in human rights protection as well.
- **Connect** with organizations supporting those affected by human rights issues and fundraise for them through your school or student groups affiliated with organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the Global Youth Action Network.
- **Vote**, when you are old enough! With few exceptions, you can't vote until you're 18, but in many states you can register at 16 or 17, and you'll be all set when 18 rolls around.

TEEN TRAILBLAZER

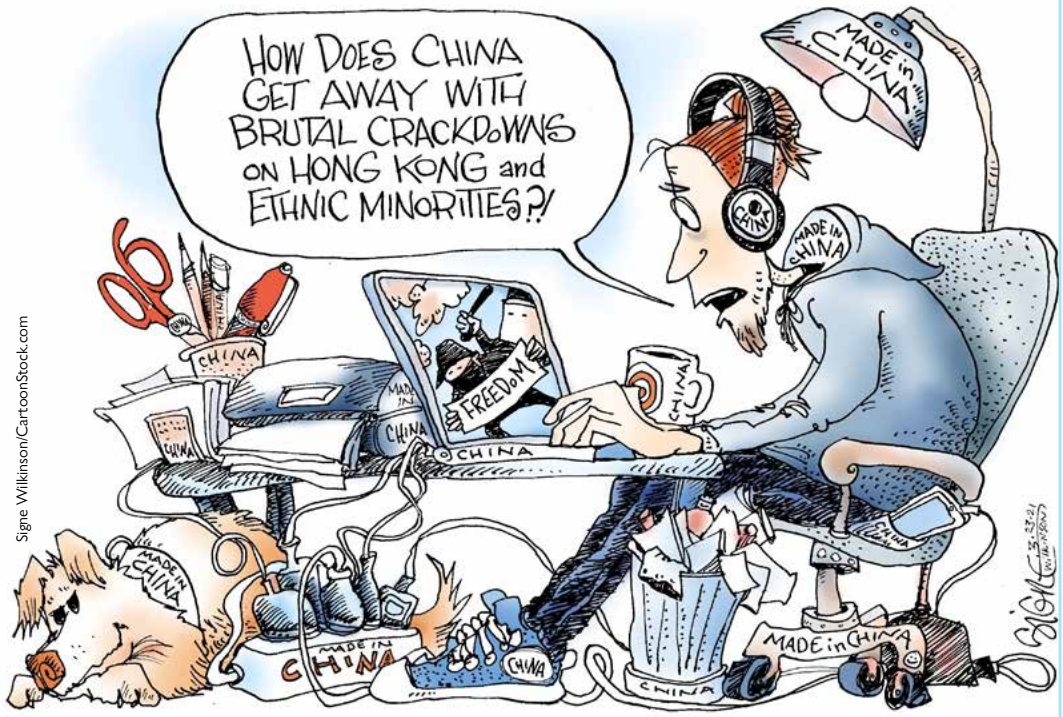
Hadia Choudhary



USSYP

Since 2021, Arkansas teenager Hadia Choudhary has been working to end the human rights abuses inflicted by China on the Uyghurs with her organization, End the Uyghur Genocide. Hadia uses theatre, education and advocacy, combined with social media activism in order to raise awareness about the situation in Xinjiang, China. Hadia's advocacy has brought her to Washington, DC, as part of the US Senate Youth Program, alongside her work to bring policy change on the state level in Arkansas. Her work using strategies to impact both lawmakers and the public provides a model for young activists who want to raise awareness and bring policy change on any human rights issue.

THE BACK PAGE



Signe Wilkinson/CartoonStock.com

WHO'S TO BLAME?

1. What is this cartoon trying to say? Why do or don't you agree?
2. How can the decisions and purchases of individual people have an impact on global human rights?
3. Is it possible for people to avoid products made in countries where there are human right violations? Why is or isn't this a fair thing to ask?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. Which human rights are the most important to you, and why?
2. What role should a powerful country like the US play around the world? Should the US government pursue an isolationist or interventionist foreign policy agenda?
3. **YOUR STORY:** Would you give up certain rights to protect others? For example, would you give up your privacy to feel safer from violence?

KEY WORDS & TERMS

bipartisan
genocide
human rights
humanitarian
interventionist
isolationist
refugees
sanctions
superpowers
Temporary Protected Status
United Nations

FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION 1918

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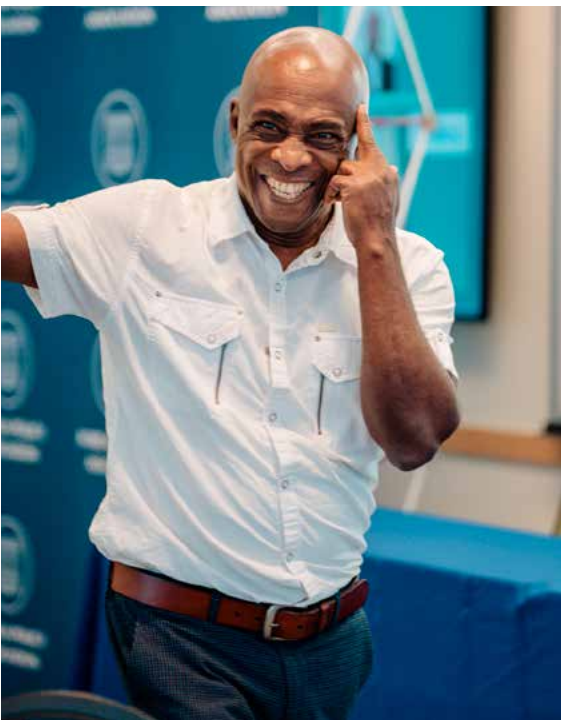
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