

1992 Buenos Aires

At the International Federation of Social Workers conference in Buenos Aires, the news broke of the end of the state of emergency in South Africa. A country, which for decades had been a by word for repression, was on the verge of rejoining the community of nations. Coupled with the impact of perestroika in Eastern Europe, there was a positive feeling that the cause of Human Rights and the fundamental freedoms of the individual was gaining ground throughout the world.

In the long perspective of history, that may prove to be the case. Much, however, remains to be achieved at an individual level before Human Rights can confidently be espoused throughout the world. The Commission, by the decision of the General Meeting, was required to focus its work on social workers and social work students persecuted because of their professional activities. The borderline between the professional and the political is sometimes hard to discern, particularly in countries where an oppressive regime holds sway. The Commission has, therefore, continued to intervene on behalf of social workers in conflict with oppressive regimes, where their activity stems from a commitment to the under privileged.

Benedict Tobin in Malaysia, Shirley Gunn in South Africa, and most recently, Ma Tar in Myanmar, are examples of individuals whose political and professional convictions have led them into activities unwelcome to the Government.

The efforts of member associations in pressing for indemnity from prosecution for Shirley Gunn in South Africa brought a successful outcome late in the year when the Government agreed to drop its charges against Shirley Gunn. The campaign elsewhere continues. The long process of bringing about change is illustrated by the case of Fermin Garcia who remains in detention in Chile years after the defeat of the Pinochet regime and whose plight deserves the continuing support of the Commission and of member associations.

Important as is individual activity on behalf of detained social workers, it is essential that in daily practice, social workers' professional conduct upholds the cause of Human Rights. The best way to achieve this is to secure a firm foundation of Human Rights education as part of the basic social work training curriculum. Thanks to the remarkable efforts of the Associate Secretary General, Ellen Apostol and her skill in using networks to good advantage, the UN Centre for Human Rights, through the Voluntary Fund for Technical Cooperation in the field of Human Rights, has agreed to support a meeting of a working group to develop the draft curriculum for Human Rights. The aim is to provide an agreed international framework which can be used to develop Human Rights education as part of social work courses throughout the world. This covers international statutes, the existing implementation machinery in relation to Human Rights, and those situations requiring special attention, including race, gender, childcare and torture. While the context and detail will need to reflect the national and regional perspective, the core content will be common to all countries. The support of the UN for this venture,