

NATIONAL PROGRAMME FOR THE PROTECTION AND PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN LATVIA

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II. EDUCATION, TRAINING AND INFORMATION

The fifth general principle of the "Education Reform in Latvia" states that:

"All citizens of Latvia, regardless of their property, social status, race, nationality, political or religious affiliation, membership of different groups, work or residence, have equal rights to education. Those citizens of other countries or non-citizens legally residing in Latvia, who pay taxes to the Republic of Latvia, have the same rights to education as citizens of Latvia. The rights of other persons to education fall within the provisions of international agreements".

The 1993 World Conference on Human Rights concluded that human rights education, training and information were "essential for the promotion and achievement of stable and harmonious relations among communities and for fostering mutual understanding, tolerance and peace". / Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, part II, para. 78./ The World Conference also called on all States and institutions "to include human rights, humanitarian law, democracy and rule of law as subjects in the curricula of all learning institutions in formal and non-formal settings". / Ibid., para. 79./

To comply with the spirit of these decisions by the international community, Governments, with the assistance of the international organizations (and, where appropriate, bilateral donors), national institutions and NGOs should take whatever action they can to promote an increased awareness of human rights. They should not only initiate and support formal education programmes in human rights, but also ensure effective dissemination of information to the general public.

There is an urgent and fundamental need to educate the public in Latvia on the meaning of human rights and the essential role which the protection and promotion of human rights plays in a democratic society.

It is also essential to inform the public of the rights and obligations of the State according to Latvia's international treaty obligations. The term "human rights" has lost much of its meaning to the people of Latvia due to the cynical abuse of the phrase during 50 years of Soviet occupation. Therefore, conditions need to be created to ensure that the public opinion is informed about the meaning of the concept of "human rights" so that the full range of issues be included in public debate.

Latvia is just beginning its process of educational reform. The objective of Latvia's education reform / As outlined in "Education Reform in Latvia", published in May 1994 by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science./ is "to create a system of education, appropriate to a democratic society" and two of its guiding principles are that: "(1) Every person has a right to education. According to individual wishes, interests, needs and abilities, the educational system offers equal opportunities to receive education; and (2) Education is active. It is based on a concept of the essential values in a democratic society - freedom, creative attitude to any work, a critical view on any process in life and society, a sense of responsibility for the result of one's work".

The existing Law on Education was adopted in June 1991. However, Latvia has since embarked on a fundamental transition and there is now widespread agreement that the Government must develop a new Law on Education which would comply with internationally accepted norms. / It is envisaged that a new Law on Education will be in force by the

beginning of the 1995/96 academic year./ As outlined in "Education Reform in Latvia": "the basic principles of education are humanity, democracy, individualization, creative activity, national spirit, virtuousness, professionalism, scientific character, a systematic approach, contemporaneity". In order to effectively integrate human rights principles within revised curricula, "respect for protection of human rights" should be specifically included in the definition of "basic principles" in the new Law on Education. While no human rights education programme exists in the formal educational establishment, specific curricula for courses on democracy have been developed, within which components on promotion of human rights could be incorporated. / A course on democracy is presently offered as an elective for grade 9 students./

In addition to curriculum development, there is a need to train teachers at all levels in the promotion of human rights. / A number of valuable tools for the teaching of human rights are immediately available from several international bilateral and non-governmental organizations. An example is the booklet "Teaching Human Rights - Practical Activities for Primary and Secondary Schools" (1989) published by the United Nations Centre for Human Rights. This booklet provides basic information for teachers in primary and secondary schools who want to foster awareness and knowledge of human rights. The Council of Europe also provides assistance to teachers of primary, secondary and vocational schools to attend the International Training Session on Human Rights and Peace Teaching organized by the Geneva-based International Training Centre on Human Rights and Peace Training. The Netherlands Helsinki Committee also has a special human rights education programme in the Baltic States./ Teacher-training is currently provided by both public and private establishments and there is considerable scope for the development of teacher-training modules in human rights promotion. / Publicly funded teacher-training institutes include Liepaja Pedagogical College, Riga Teacher Training College, Imanta Teacher Training Institute and Rezekne Teacher Training Institute. (Further information on the educational system in Latvia is contained in the booklet "Education in the Republic of Latvia" published in 1993 by the Ministry of Education.) / Other needs within the field of education include creating counselling facilities and social education centres in different parts of Latvia for a variety of vulnerable groups, including pensioners, single mothers and people recently released from prison.

In order to address the problem of taking care of children in after-school hours, it is of importance to develop a situation where those children attending schools have a chance to participate in appropriate after-school activities. Cooperation between schools located near each other should be encouraged to help solve this problem. It is in the interests of the State to promote multifaceted educational opportunities for disabled children, while providing parents the opportunity to participate in the workforce.

Another important education issue is raising teachers' awareness of the rights of children with disabilities (including the mentally ill). Basic human rights principles, with which Latvia's policies and practices should comply, are set out in two recently concluded international instruments - the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. / The latter was adopted by the General Assembly in December 1993./ Latvia clearly has limited resources. However, the Convention on the Rights of the Child acknowledges that the rights it enumerates should be implemented progressively by Governments - in accordance with the resources at their disposal.

In order to transform knowledge about human rights into operational skills, professional training courses as well as a comprehensive programme of judicial training and retraining are required. A general programme of legal training is an urgent priority - given the lack of legally trained officials in Latvia's public administration. In addition to judges, lawyers and

prosecutors, human rights training needs to be provided to members of the Saeima, the media, trade union officials, employer associations and labour inspectors.

Special human rights education and training programmes need to be provided to those professional groups which have a critical impact on human rights practice - including the police and other structures of the Ministry of Interior, the heads of those structures, as well as the military and the leaders of the military.

Such training programmes can be effective and relatively inexpensive if they are structured to reflect the operational realities of the groups involved. For example, training programmes for the military could be designed and executed at four levels of intensity:

- The first level is the minimum level of understanding required for all personnel.
- The second level builds on this understanding and is designed for members of operational units likely to have direct contact with the public.
- The third level of courses would be for those personnel involved in planning and directing operations and administration at headquarters/command level.
- The fourth level of training would be for service legal officers, designed to equip them with the necessary expertise to provide advice to operational commanders.

There is a need to better inform the general public about their respective rights and responsibilities. / Basic human rights material is available through the United Nations Centre for Human Rights and the Council of Europe. With regard to the latter, the Council of Europe's "Human Rights Album" presents articles from the European Convention on Human Rights in easily understandable form with illustrations which make it accessible to children. The United Nations produces a wealth of informational material such as "Human Rights: A Compilation of International Instruments" as well as a number of booklets/fact sheets covering areas such as "Human Rights Machinery" and "The International Bill of Rights". / The Ministry of State Reform has initiated the publication and dissemination of a series of brochures through postal services and other social service offices. Over 200,000 copies of such brochures have already been distributed on social welfare aid for the poor, expectant mothers, privatization vouchers and income tax. In the nearest future, brochures will be published on issues including the rights of citizens and non-citizens, the process of naturalization, the tax system and consular services. A number of NGOs have also started to disseminate material on human rights issues. / For example, the news-letters published by the Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies./

However, it is the responsibility of the Government to speedily collect, translate and disseminate all international treaties and agreements to which Latvia has acceded along with other materials on human rights, including textbooks on national and international law, international human rights treaties and other instruments from the United Nations, Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

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