

The Hindustan Times, New Delhi, 10 Dec 2007

## Still in human blights

IT HAS been 60 years to the day since the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the universal standard for promoting human rights across the world. But, alas, more sighs than smiles may mark Human Rights Day this time round for India as it struggles to burnish its credentials on the issue of human rights. For it is doubtful if the country can honestly endorse this year's theme of "Dignity and justice for all of us", as long as many of its citizens remain alien to the values of human dignity, non-discrimination, and fairness. True, India has maintained a fairly good track record on human rights when compared to its neighbours like Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. While these States lurch from one political and economic crisis to another, the human development graph in India has been steadily, if slowly, climbing. But the facts on the ground would

suggest that we have yet to have a genuine human rights culture. Armed groups like the Naxalites commit grave violations with impunity. If anything is more unfortunate, it is the way the State responds to these atrocities. Torture and ill-treatment of prisoners are common, and it is no secret that hundreds have died in custody. Add to this the hundreds more who become victims of extra-judicial executions or forced 'disappearances', and it puts a huge question mark over the commitment of law enforcement agencies to human rights. The irony is starker for India where large-scale episodes of communal violence remain unpunished as discrimination, faulty investigation, and political interference constantly defeat efforts to prosecute those responsible. The country must take a closer look at its persistent human rights challenges and identify new strategies to deal with them.