

HUMAN RIGHTS ON TRIAL

From *Activities Using the Sixth Edition State of the World Atlas*.

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Standards Addressed:

How the forces of cooperation and conflict among people influence the division and control of the earth's surface.

Geographic Themes Addressed:

Place

Overview:

This activity, more in-depth than Activity #9 "Crimes Against Humanity," uses a case study approach in which students write an indictment of a nation for violation of human rights. Students can refer directly to international law, including "The Declaration of Human Rights," for specific violations. The format can be adapted to prepare for a Model UN conference or for a model international human rights conference such as the one held in Helsinki.

Grade Level:

9-12

Time:

Two to three class periods (based on a 50 minute class) plus time for individual research.

Materials Needed:

Handout #10, "Human Rights on Trial"

Resources for independent research on human rights

Procedure:

1. List the following human rights situations on the board. Ask the students, in small groups, to decide whether they feel personal responsibility to the people involved in one or more of the situations (examples from current events may be substituted for any or all of the following).
 - A. Students protesting for democracy in China become political prisoners in the Chinese "gulag"
 - B. A study has indicated that racial minorities are more likely to receive the death penalty in the United States
 - C. Journalists covering a civil war in Africa are arrested by the government, which claims that the journalists were helping the rebels
 - D. Girls in Bangladesh are much less likely to get a secondary education than their brothers
 - E. Rug exporters in Afghanistan use child labor who are paid the equivalent of pennies per day to weave rugs that are sold for hundred of dollars
 - F. Native Americans have been discouraged from teaching their children their native language

2. Ask each group to report to the class on its conclusions. In which situations did the students feel personal responsibility? Why? Which situations (if any) did they feel were beyond the sphere of their own responsibility? Why? Encourage discussion and debate on the question of whether or not we bear responsibility for abuses that are far removed from us in distance or experience. Do we have a responsibility to find out about human rights abuses, or is it better not to know?
3. Explain that under international law, it is now possible to prosecute human rights violators, including governments and individuals. There are also other pressures which we can use to make human rights violators in another country take notice, such as boycotts, letter-writing campaigns, etc. (If the students are not familiar with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Court of Justice in the Hague, refer them to materials on the UN in your media center or local library, or to the following web sites: <<http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/index.htm>> and <<http://www.icj-cij.org>>).
4. Preview the activity by explaining that students will be developing indictments against one country in the world that they think has committed serious violations of human rights. Ask them to list countries which have been accused of human rights violations. Record the names of all countries mentioned by the students on the board. Ask others to make comments on the list. Are there any reasons why a particular region may have more or fewer human rights violations? Is our definition of a human rights violation sometimes culturally biased? Ask the students where they got their information about human rights violations and if they trust the sources. Then ask if some of the countries on the list have made recent progress in dealing with human rights. Remind the students that some of our information may be outdated as changes may occur very quickly when they involve human rights (unfortunately, sometimes not quickly enough).
5. Distribute Handout #10. Students may choose one country for which there is sufficient information in the Atlas. Their first step will be to gather information from The State of the World Atlas on human rights in that country. Remind students to think of economic and social rights as well as political rights and to note the page numbers of the maps from which they collect their information.
6. Allow students time to do further research on their countries using sources such as Amnesty International country reports and articles in newspapers and magazines. (Website for Amnesty International: <<http://www.amnesty.org>>)
7. Review with the student the style and format of a prosecutor's indictment. Each student will then prepare a brief argument for the prosecution against the country which he/she studied. The indictment should include specific charges of human rights violations, supporting evidence and statistics, and a plan for a course of action that could be taken by the United States government or an international agency. (The course of action may be as extreme as extradition or legal sanction or it may be a boycott, embargo, or letter writing campaign)

8. Students may present their arguments for the prosecution as well as their recommendations for action to be taken to remedy the situation in front of a "grand jury" or the International Court of Justice, which may vote whether or not to indict the country. Students should be encouraged to include charts, photos, witnesses, or any other features of a courtroom presentation. You may decide to have students just complete a written indictment and have the jury decide the cases based upon the written evidence presented to them if you are pressed for time.

Debriefing:

These questions are intended to deepen the level of the students' understanding:

- Is there an acceptable level of human rights violations before the international community should become concerned and/or involved? Why or why not?
- What factors should a country and/or an international organization consider in determining a course of action against human rights violations? Should our government avoid interfering in human rights issues in nations which support our policies or from which we get valuable resources?
- Is any action, even direct military involvement, justified in order to stem human rights violations on the part of a nation?