

The 1987 State of Human Rights Address

The Honorable Jimmy Carter

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Introduction

Those assembled here, many of you being true heroes in your own way in the promotion of human rights, realize that suffering throughout the world unfortunately never wanes; it hasn't in our lifetime. But attention given to this suffering moves sometimes in cycles, with increasing emphasis on occasion through the news media and by statements from public officials; at other times there is relative inattention given to this crucial problem.

It is an honor for us at The Carter Center to be with two heroes of human rights, La Vicaria de la Solidaridad, which is being honored today, and Mrs. Dominique de Menil, a true hero on her own. Her attention to even the most minute and unpublicized human rights abuse has always been of paramount significance in her life. She keeps the fire, the flame, of human rights burning, and I am always honored and impressed and humbled when I am in her presence. Today I have been asked by Mrs. de Menil to give a brief report on a subject that would require voluminous report if it were done adequately, but I'll do my best in a few minutes to outline my own thoughts on the status of human rights in the days in which we live.

The State of Human Rights Address

While Hitler's armies dominated Europe, six million Jews were killed; the world remained mostly silent. While Joseph Stalin eliminated ten million of his fellow countrymen, the world was mostly silent.

There was no lack of noble ideals being expressed by our leaders. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was calling for "a world founded upon four essential human freedoms." These he identified as "freedom of speech and expression," "freedom of every person to worship God in his own way," "freedom from want," and "freedom from fear." In the meantime, the horrible crimes continued.

There is no doubt that, since the second world war, awareness of these atrocities has changed the attitude of the international community in dealing with human rights violations. The old order habitually characterized human rights issues as matters of domestic concern, permitting each nation to treat its citizens as it saw fit and branding inquiries or criticisms by outsiders as unlawful intervention. This legal doctrine kept the curtain of silence securely drawn around these crimes and prevented exposure and condemnation by other countries.

The United Nations Charter was written with knowledge of the Holocaust, its words expressing the world's concerns about human rights and making the promotion of freedom a matter of international concern. Then, three years later, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. This document evolved into the Magna Carta of humankind and gave birth to the international covenants on human rights, the U.N. Racial Convention, other international human rights treaties, and various specialized instruments.

During the same time, Harry S. Truman expressed the standards for our nation: "The attainment of worldwide respect for essential human rights is synonymous with the attainment of world peace. The people of the world want a peaceful world, a prosperous world, and a free world, and where the basic rights of men everywhere are observed and respected, there will be such a world. On us as a nation rests the responsibility of taking a position of leadership in the struggle for human rights. We cannot turn aside from the task if we wish to remain true to the vision of our forefathers and the ideals that have made our history what it is."

These eloquent declarations concerning oppression and evil have brought hope to many victims and inspired those who resisted the advance of totalitarianism.

Although the treaties and agreements are frequently violated, they have legitimized the international human rights debate, enabling the United States and other countries to condemn violations of human rights wherever they may occur. All signatories of the U.N. Charter have pledged themselves to promote the observance of and respect for basic human rights. Thus, no member of the United Nations can claim that mistreatment of its citizens is solely its own business. To speak out on behalf of human rights in Chile, Cuba, Kampuchea, Haiti, Iran, the Soviet Union, El Salvador, and in areas long occupied by military powers is no longer considered an intervention in the domestic affairs of these countries. Other nations have never been reluctant to criticize violations of human rights in our country. International law today recognizes that how a government treats its own citizens is of concern to other countries; it affects the international community as a whole.

This willingness to expose and prevent violations of human rights has led to the development of non-governmental national and international human rights organizations. La Vicaria de la Solidaridad is one notable example. Others include Amnesty International, Americas Watch, Helsinki Watch, The International League for Human Rights, and The Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. These organizations, the human rights watchdogs of the world, now have the legal and political legitimacy they need to function.

As the world community recognized more than four decades ago, peace and human rights are closely interconnected. Humanity's yearning for peace and freedom cuts across ideological boundaries and unites the human family. One cannot long exist without the other. Today, the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, provides a special opportunity for us to reflect on the state of human rights in the world.

In the 39 years that have elapsed since the Universal Declaration was adopted, much has been achieved in the United States. Courageous civil rights leaders were successful in their fight to end racial discrimination and legally authorized segregation of the races. We still have a long way to go in fulfilling the needs of our people for housing, health care, full employment, and equal opportunity, but there is no doubt that we have made great progress.

In the early 1970's, our Congress adopted the first of many laws tying U.S. economic and military aid to the human rights records of recipient nations and requiring the executive branch to monitor the human rights performance of these countries. When I became president, I not only encouraged these congressional initiatives, but made the promotion of human rights a cornerstone of our foreign policy. We created a strong Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs in the State Department, instructed all our ambassadors to monitor human

rights observance in the nations where they served, and directed that American embassies around the world be havens for victims of abuse from their own governments.

Other nations, particularly the western democracies, joined us in this commitment. Today, many of these governments have developed their own human rights organizations and adopted supporting legislation. Most of these countries have signed the major international human rights instruments that I named earlier. As president, I sent four of these treaties to the U.S. Senate for ratification. Unfortunately, the Senate has yet to act on these requests.

Despite lack of concerted action, the international community at least sees the protection of human rights as a critical issue, and there is now a legal, institutional and political framework to advance it. The main problem is not a lack of laws. The problem is that we do not support the ones we have. Enforcement is feeble and selective at best.

The colonial empires that blanketed the map of Africa and parts of Asia, with their economic exploitation and massive violations of human rights, have largely disappeared. But apartheid has elevated bigotry to a shameful ideology of hate and oppression. Apartheid survives with the tacit acceptance of nations unwilling to surrender their economic ties to the racist regime in South Africa.

The Gulag, in which millions of people died under Stalin and his successors, appears to be giving way to a more open society, but at the same time many Soviet citizens are denied the right to emigrate so that their families may be united.

In Latin America, human rights heroes are struggling to transform a region of dictatorial regimes into nations committed to freedom and democracy, but oppression continues in Paraguay, Chile, Cuba, and Haiti.

That the international community has still not learned how to prevent and punish genocide was made apparent by the horrors of POI Pot in Kampuchea.

Although various international commissions and committees have been established to promote the observance of human rights, the brutal fact is that none of these institutions has yet lived up to its potential.

The United States was one of the first nations to promote the development of international human rights law, but has to date ratified no major human rights treaty. There are only a handful of countries — South Africa is one of them — that have as poor a record on this subject as our own.

This does not mean, of course, that we are serious violators of human rights. It does mean that our efforts to promote human rights are hampered. By failing to ratify these conventions, we weaken the very international institutions that have become the strongest defenders of human rights. Furthermore, the countries we criticize for violations question our authority since we have refused to accept the obligations we ask them to honor.

Some years ago I declared that human rights must be the soul of American foreign policy if we are to be true to our beliefs, that any other course would violate the moral and political commitment of the American people to freedom and human dignity. It is clear that in recent years our leaders have lowered the emphasis on human rights.

The United States is seriously in default on its payment of dues, both to the United Nations and to the Organization of American States. As a result, these organizations are close to bankruptcy. The shortage of funds has had a catastrophic impact on the activities of their human rights institutions. It is imperative, therefore, that our country comply with its financial obligations to the U.N. and the O.A.S.

Our commitment to human rights must always be clear, consistent, indisputable, and unequivocal. The United States must guard against neglect of this issue from either the White House or the Congress. We need a permanent human rights review body in the State Department and, an advocate general whose duty it would be to report to Congress any apparent violations by our government of international law.

We should strengthen the United Nations in every way possible and revive the long-dormant Costa Rican proposal for the establishment of The Office of U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights. Such a position, modeled on The Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, is needed to give this effort the institutional importance and high international visibility required for the effective performance of its functions. The high commissioner should be given specific powers to deal with serious violations of human rights.

Our definition of human rights should not be too narrow. People have a right to fill vital economic needs — to be fed, housed, clothed, and educated. Civil and political rights must be protected — freedom of speech, thought, assembly, travel, and the right to participate in government. The rights of personal integrity are the most obvious of all — freedom from arbitrary arrest or imprisonment, torture, or murder by one's own government.

Our humanity requires that we protest whenever violations of human rights occur anywhere, but our effectiveness in moving the world toward more humane treatment of people requires that we make some distinctions. The most serious human rights violations involve attacks on the rights of people to life and freedom.

Torture is still used on a massive scale by governments around the world. In South Africa, even children — many hundreds of them — have been imprisoned and tortured by a government whose cruel apartheid policies have justly earned it worldwide condemnation. The practice of forced disappearances, a euphemism for murder, which was ultimately exposed in Argentina and Brazil, continues in some Latin American countries and elsewhere. Not only are police and military officials practicing or tolerating the use of torture and murder, but there is strong evidence to suggest the active collaboration of attorneys and physicians, which is a shameful perversion of professions sworn to justice and healing.

Wars and civil violence in Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and Africa cost hundreds of thousands of lives annually. The survivors cry out for help. There are millions of refugees — injured, hungry and homeless people — in these regions. This is a vast human tragedy. One-party, oppressive regimes of the left and right dominate Africa and the Middle East, and still exist in Asia and Latin America. The Soviet Union and its satellites and the People's Republic of China systematically deny basic civil and political rights to individuals and groups alike. Most of these countries tolerate no political dissent, deny freedom of expression, and severely limit freedom of movement and travel.

When authoritarian and totalitarian systems of government display signs of liberalization, as seems to be occurring with "glasnost" in the Soviet Union and progress toward free elections in South Korea, these trends should be encouraged by the international community.

The best assurance that fundamental personal rights will be respected is within democratic systems where people can replace their leaders peacefully by secret ballot and where independent courts can prevent the arbitrary use of power. The initial signs of transition toward democracy in Haiti were welcome, but that country has recently suffered a setback by inaction or outright obstruction of elections by the military government. The international community must support the Provisional Electoral Commission as the only guarantor of electoral freedom for Haitians.

A similar need exists for free elections in Chile, where citizens have long cried out for the right to choose their own leaders, to escape oppression, and to shape the destiny of their nation.

The sweep of democracy across Latin America in the last decade is a source of joy for all of us, but many of these new democracies are still fragile and face serious human rights dilemmas. The question of whether to give amnesty to those who murdered or "disappeared" others is a most difficult one for these new democracies. The heavy burden of external debt prevents the alleviation of poverty, homelessness, and starvation.

Even long-standing democracies suffer from human rights problems. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are now in their twenty-first year of living under military occupation, deprived of political and economic rights. Some Israeli leaders are eagerly seeking a peace agreement with their neighbors that would end human rights abuses in the occupied territories; others are not so concerned about this tragedy.

The United States finds itself among a diminishing group of nations that impose the death penalty on children. Recently the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ruled that by engaging in this practice our nation was in plain violation of its international human rights obligations. It is worth noting, in this connection, that while our own resort to executions is on the increase, most countries of Western Europe have recently signed an international agreement outlawing the death penalty altogether.

The recent riots by Cuban prisoners in Atlanta and Louisiana offered a tragic reminder of a misuse of U.S. law. If those Cubans had been permitted a fair review of their cases by an independent body, as the eventual agreement produced, we would have been spared the terrible tragedy of the past weeks.

South Africa should be high on our agenda for the new year. Given the worsening human rights situation there, it is clear that the United States and other nations must develop a stronger policy, including a broad range of economic sanctions, to compel South Africa to end apartheid and to withdraw from its unlawful occupation of Namibia.

Present and former world leaders should join in a solemn effort to stop the widespread practice of torture and forced disappearances. As a first step, the U.S. and all other nations should ratify the U.N. and O.A.S. treaties outlawing torture.

International organizations of lawyers and medical doctors should commit themselves to exposing and stamping out these crimes about which some of their fellow practitioners almost always have special knowledge.

We need closer coordination among nongovernmental human rights organizations and the national and international groups that share the same purposes.

People of all ages should be educated about the vital subject of human rights. The inseparable link between human suffering and wars of revolution must be more clearly understood.

We are honoring the Vicaria today for its courageous work as a human rights monitor. Its own tragic experiences and those of other human rights champions prove that the international community must begin to think about a formal system to protect and confer immunity on these organizations to permit them to discharge their important work. Jacobo Timerman recently called the Vicaria "the conscience of Chile." Together, human rights monitors can serve as the world's conscience. Their protection is a moral obligation and political duty of us all.

We at The Carter Center commit ourselves to explore with foreign and American policy makers and human rights experts the implementation of these strategies.

As the most powerful and influential country on earth, the United States has a special responsibility. Ours should be the highest of all standards. Our voice and our example reverberate throughout the world. And so does silence from Washington. This silence is what oppressors desire and what victims fear most. Jacobo Timerman, who was one of the courageous survivors of persecution in Argentina, said: "What there was, from the start, was the great silence — that silence which can transform any nation into an accomplice ... "

We must not be accomplices of those who commit human rights crimes. The time is ripe for more courageous action to mitigate the suffering of those who still cry out to us in pain.