

The Carter-Menil Human Rights Prize

The 1989 State of Human Rights Address

The Honorable Jimmy Carter

Introduction

You can see in your program that the last speaker was Dedi Zucker, one of the founders of Peace Now and a member of the Israeli Knesset, responsible for the policies of Israel. You heard him grieve over the fact that 250,000 Palestinian children were deprived of an education. His apartment has been attacked, his life has been threatened, and still he comes here to represent a nation in which he deeply believes, and I think his actions and words are courageous demonstrations of why this award is significant to us.

It's been my duty and privilege the last few years to give an annual address on human rights. Each one is somewhat different, as you'll notice today. I'm not going to dwell particularly on Israel, the Middle East, or the occupied territories; I'm going to talk about the greatest human rights crime of all, and that is war.

The State of Human Rights Address

Those of us who have assembled for these annual Carter-Menil Human Rights awards cannot fail to appreciate the thousands of courageous and unsung heroes who continue to defend the sanctity of individual human rights. We have, at least vicariously, felt the anguish and suffering of those who have been imprisoned, tortured, and murdered because they cried out for freedom and human dignity. We have been honored ourselves to recognize a Soviet citizen who condemned the policies of a mighty totalitarian state; a family that has faced decades in prison to expunge white racism from their land; a church in Chile that joined, to quote the Sermon on the Mount, the "Blessed who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness;" and a group of mothers in Guatemala who have never ceased to demand justice for the murderers of their own disappeared children.

We at The Carter Center work closely with many of the human rights watch groups, who help us choose the recipients of this award each year, and who inform us almost daily about governments that commit crimes against their own citizens. Just this week we joined others in an effort to stay the execution of medical doctors who had peacefully demonstrated against oppression in Khartoum. Both they and their oppressors know that not a single human rights activist, known to these watch groups, is ever ignored or forgotten. There is no way to measure the suffering that is prevented by this constant worldwide vigilance.

But only recently has the attention of the human rights community been focused publically on the humiliation and suffering in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, on people who, for more than 22 years, have never known a day of freedom. They cannot vote, they cannot assemble peacefully, they cannot choose their own leaders, they cannot travel without restrictions, they cannot operate

their own schools, they cannot own property without risking its confiscation through a multitude of legal ruses. Some of these families – Christian and Moslem – have cultivated the same hillsides since the time of Christ. Now they are often forbidden to replace a barren olive tree, to deepen a dried up well, or to market their fruit in competition with their dominant neighbors.

This oppression has instigated the violence of the *intifadah*, during which more than 600 Palestinians have been killed by Israelis, of whom 125 were children. This tragedy has been compounded by 138 deaths from the hands of other Palestinians against so-called collaborators. Damage to human souls has been reciprocal. The peace, reputation, and conscience of Israeli citizens like those who have just spoken have suffered terribly, while forty of them have lost their lives. Such are the ravages of war.

Our honorees today have exhibited a special kind of courage: not only risking their personal safety, but risking the condemnation of their own friends and neighbors and relatives in speaking out for compassion, justice, reconciliations, and peace. In an effective way, Al-Haq and B'Tselem have helped to dramatize a special kind of human rights crime: those caused by civil war.

It is often easier for us to detect and evaluate a local or individual problem than to envision tragedy on a grander scale. We become angry and active when we see a filthy garbage dump or a polluted stream. But we are less likely to be aroused by the wider devastation of acid rain, the warming of our atmosphere by the build-up of carbon dioxide, the depletion of ozone over the south polar region, or the decimation of tropical forests. The importation and sale of marijuana is condemned and punished as a serious crime, but we accept as legitimate the manufacture and sale of an infinitely more addictive and deadly drug: the nicotine in cigarettes, which cost the lives of 290,000 American citizens last year.

So it is with human rights. We become personally distressed and go to action when we learn that a lawyer is imprisoned without trial, that a young Palestinian activist has been sent into exile, or that “emergency measures” have superseded legal rights. This is a proper and justifiable reaction. However, we are much more likely to ignore the consequences of war, when the number of victims is multiplied a thousand-fold, and when the suffering is more likely to fall on those who are poor, quiet, inarticulate, and helpless – our fellow human beings who are doomed to early starvation or a lifetime of deprivation. They are the refugees and other victims of war – the women, children, and aged who are innocent and most often docile, not even able to comprehend the causes of their plight. I have visited Palestinians who have lived more than forty years in the Gaza Strip camps, Cambodians beginning their third decade of imprisonment as refugees in eastern Thailand, fierce Afghans living outside their country in the western mountains of Pakistan, and a camp of 40,000 Dinka tribesmen on an enormous garbage dump near Khartoum, displaced from their homes in southern Sudan. These are just a tiny portion of the millions of people – human flotsam – who have been robbed of their possessions and driven from their homes by war.

We Americans are proud of ourselves as champions of human rights, and this pride is justified if we use the conveniently narrow definition as specified in the U.S. Constitution: freedom of speech, assembly, religion, the press, and the right to bear arms. It is truly disturbing to me, and

to those of you who have traveled overseas in particular, to learn that we are soundly condemned by others who consider a job, health care, and adequate housing to be of equal importance. Of even greater concern is our reputation as a prime champion of armed violence, both on our own streets and through the use of military force in other nations.

Despite some commendable reverses in policy during recent months, the Reagan legacy survives. Most of us have quickly forgotten the bombing and shelling of mountain villages around Beirut by our American ships and airplanes, but the people of Lebanon still remember. We have poured billions of dollars into El Salvador, most of the support going to military leaders who openly condone and probably direct the notorious death squads. The world knows that it was some of these same Salvadoran army troops who recently murdered six priests, leaving behind their scooped out brains as a bizarre warning to religious workers of all denominations not to criticize the right-wing leaders. We look the other way and maintain the flow of arms.

More than 40,000 Nicaraguan citizens have been killed and the country's economy has been shattered. Although the ill-advised policies of the Sandinistas must bear much blame, United States sponsorship of the contra war and our economic blockade are considered by many to be the primary causes of the suffering. IN a recent poll made public at The Carter Center a few weeks ago, 56 percent of the registered voters of Nicaragua (both pro- and anti-Sandinista) considered the United States to be their foremost enemy in the world.

Soviet troops have withdrawn from Afghanistan and the Vietnamese are no longer in Kampuchea. However, instead of using our tremendous prestige and influence for a peaceful settlement of these ongoing conflicts, we are still contributing weapons and ammunition to the combatants, even including the notorious Khmer Rouge regime of Pol Pot.

These are now household names to the people of our country: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Cambodia. But even worse destruction is barely noticed in American news reports.

Two weeks ago Rosalynn and I were in Addis Ababa and Nairobi, attempting to mediate an end to the war between the Government of Ethiopia and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). A million lives have been lost in the last 28 years of that war. A third generation of children in northern Ethiopia and Eritrea are now receiving a rudimentary education in caves, seeking daytime safety from bullets and bombs that rain down on them by Ethiopian pilots flying Soviet-produced airplanes. In Addis Ababa I was told that the Ethiopian air force had recently acquired cluster bombs from one of our Middle East allies to be used against rebel villages, and that this might soon bring an end to the war. This is an especially vicious weapon, which detonates several hundred feet above the ground, scattering dozens – sometimes hundreds – of small explosives like hand grenades around a large area. Cluster bombs were developed by the United States to create death and terror among civilians in Vietnam. We later sold them to one or two countries under strict constraints, to be used only as defensive weapons in case of invasion.

Now those allies are manufacturing cluster bombs to be sold in the Third World, without further restraint at all on their use.

Looking in either direction from Ethiopia, other conflicts rage on. Eastward, there is a civil war of almost indescribably complexity and devastation going on in Somalia. So far as I know, no effort whatsoever is being made there to find peace.

Westward lies the Sudan. Last year, as Christians in the South fought against the imposition of Shari'a law – Moslem law – by a predominantly Moslem government in Khartoum, more people perished in this country than in all other conflicts on earth: 260,000. Eighty-five percent of the fatalities were noncombatants. Two and one-half million others are now barely surviving as displaced persons, many of them Dinkas who huddle in temporary shacks hundreds of miles north of their homes. Almost ignored, with little to eat, they have had their cattle stolen and slaughtered by armed bandits and troops in the war zone. The delivery of relief supplies to the southern war area is being prohibited by the Sudanese government with the lame excuse that weapons and ammunition might be stored among the packages of food grain and medicines waiting to be flown in by the United Nations, the International Red Cross, and several church-sponsored agencies. The withholding of food is a terrible weapon, now widely used around the world.

What a human rights calamity this is! In the Sudan alone, 2 ½ million displaced persons; 350,000 refugees who have moved into Ethiopia now live in camps; 260,000 deaths in one year. One would suppose there are profoundly important reasons for such a conflict. Until Wednesday of this week I was trying to help the warring parties end this six-year war. We narrowed the differences to this: The Christian rebels agreed to accept Islamic law if imposed in the future by a representative Constitutional Conference. Both sides agreed there should be such a conference. In exchange, would the Sudan governing body stop trials under Shari'a for a few weeks, just until the conference can be convened? So far, the answer is "no." The war has been resumed.

Peace hangs by a thread, but it has not yet been permitted to descend on this ravaged country, nor on 20 other nations where major civil conflicts rage right now.

These are the greatest human rights violations. Not only is there incalculable suffering, but the environment of war is a brutalizing force, as we've just heard from the prize recipients. Human life becomes cheap. The rights of non-combatants are ignored. Critical voices are silenced by death. Food, medical care, clothing and shelter are unavailable or deliberately withheld. What would be abhorrent crimes in a peaceful nation are considered to be justifiable acts, not only by the combatants but most often, tragically, by the rest of the world. If a war's going on it must be all right.

Must we share the responsibility? Yes. Is there anything that can be done? Yes.

Last month I was at a major university, meeting with young leaders, one from each of about two dozen nations, mostly in the less developed areas of the world. We were having a lively and enjoyable exchange, when one of them asked:

"Mr. President, we came here to prepare for future leadership in our own countries, confident that from the wealth and power of nations like yours might come the salvation of our people. However, here we only hear about budget deficits, we learn that only a tiny fraction of your

foreign aid is for humanitarian relief, and the prospect for the United States having wealth to share with us is quite remote. What can you say to give us hope for the future?"

There was a total silence in the room, and I paused for an uncomfortable time while struggling for a suitable answer. Finally I replied.

"Mikhail Gorbachev's willingness to slash military budgets has offered the world a new opportunity. This year, one trillion dollars – a thousand billion dollars – will be expended on armament.. Of this, the two superpowers spend 60 percent, and our closest allies account for another 20 percent. The other purchases come from countries like yours, already poverty stricken and deep in debt. We simply urge you to continue buying your weapons from us. If we can cut this waste in half, then 500 billion in additional funds would be available annually for food, education, homes, health care, and the elevation of the human spirit. I pray that we will have the wisdom to do this."

In the meantime, the wars go on, the waste of human and financial resources continues. Among the world's leaders, there is mostly indifference. Where are the expressions of horror and condemnation? Why is there not a marshaling of the tremendous available influence to force reconciliation between warring parties? Why are the scattered outcries for world peace simply ignored or considered signs of weakness or idealistic political aberrations?

Our all-too-feeble efforts at The Carter Center have indicated that these questions are not impossible to answer. Although governments and international organizations cannot or will not attempt to resolve most civil wars, I have found that, in many cases, both sides have welcomed our offer to initiate peace talks. Mediation is a science in itself, but one that is increasingly understood. It is a mistake to underestimate the difficulties, but it is a greater mistake to ignore the unexplored possibilities.

It is not easy to face facts. Everyone knows that the Israelis and the Palestinian Liberation Organization – yes, the PLO! – must work together to resolve the conflict so that Israel's security can be preserved while the Palestinians finally enjoy self-determination and human rights. Everyone knows that political and economic pressures and the withholding of weapon deliveries to Third World combatants might force them to the negotiating table. We all know that powerful intermediaries, trusted by both sides, can help to make the negotiations successful. We can only imagine the results if the two superpowers would together mobilize the world's influence to bring peace to Kampuchea, Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Mauritania, Senegal, and perhaps even to Lebanon and Cyprus. But for some reason, these wars are not our foremost priorities, even for those of us who revere human rights. The greatest human rights abuses of all are not being addressed. The pain persists; the tragedies endure; none of us can avoid the responsibility.