

The 1987 State of Human Rights Address

The Honorable Jimmy Carter

Dec. 10, 1987

Atlanta, Georgia

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

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

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

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

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