

**Remarks by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter at the conference  
“Human Rights Defenders on the Frontlines of Freedom,”  
Nov. 11-12, 2003, Atlanta, Ga.**

We are delighted to have this assembly here. It is a great honor for The Carter Center, and I want to welcome all of you. We have the largest committee on human rights represented here. We have America’s Watch represented here and other groups. We don’t have any governments represented here right? Nobody directly representing any government is here, so we can speak very freely about governments without fear of having too much competition or contradiction here in this meeting.

It is a pleasure to reminisce with you for a few moments at the beginning of this program, and then to cover a few issues. Twenty-seven years ago or so, I became President of the United States, a nation that was founded on the principle of human rights. One of the comments I made in my inaugural address was that the United States did not invent human rights; human rights invented the United States. We decided even before I was inaugurated, to escalate human rights to the top position on the agenda of our foreign policy. Never did I meet with a foreign leader that human rights was not on the official agenda. Every American Ambassador in the world was my direct human rights representative. Every embassy was designated by me personally, as a President, as a haven for those who were persecuted in foreign countries. This policy was looked on by some as naive or weak or a violation of commitments we had made to dictators and others who were very close allies with us in some of the global issues that we had to face. But it was a great challenge for the United States, and a great honor, to be recognized as the champion of human rights that never failed to raise high the banner of freedom and liberty and the absence of persecution.

Ten years ago, I and my wife, Rosalynn, went to Geneva. I made one of the keynote speeches in the World Conference on Human Rights. We had some very clear items on our own Carter Center agenda. One of which was the creation of the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations. I spoke about this in my address, and immediately thereafter, the secretary-general of the United Nations, Boutros-Boutros Ghali, invited me and Rosalynn to have breakfast with him and his wife the next morning, where he told me that he was very strongly opposed to having a high commissioner for human rights. He thought it would be an interference with the function of his own office and that his assistants and his deputies could adequately take care of the problem of human rights. But The Carter Center persisted, along with many of you, and eventually this office was created, and I think it has had substantial success. Not adequate yet, of course, because many governments who controlled the operations of the United Nations, as you know, are themselves persecutors of defenders like you. But this has been one of the challenges that we face.

We thought we had made good progress ten years ago in Vienna with our declaration, but shortly afterwards we were faced, as you know, with Bosnia and then with the horrible massacre of innocent people in Rwanda. The Carter Center worked five years in Rwanda

and Burundi in the Great Lakes area (of Africa), and eventually we saw the need of an International Criminal Court. The Carter Center was the host in the United States for more than one conference to promote the concept of the International Criminal Court. We were never able to get our own government to participate in a positive way. Most of them, the U.S. representatives, raised objections to the key points that would have been crucial to the International Criminal Court. But in the last few days of President Clinton's administration, he did agree, somewhat reluctantly, to sign this authorization for the International Criminal Court. With the advent of the Bush administration however, as you know, there's been a literal crusade against the implementation of the International Criminal Court.

So there have been struggles for a long time over this inherent and all pervasive concept of governments being abusive to their own citizens, which is a key factor that precipitates human rights violations. It breeds disrespect for the government. It results in a few courageous people like the defenders represented here being willing to speak out and explain, within their own countries and to the world, this is happening in my country. It's a direct violation of the principles of human rights that have been established, even shortly after the United Nations itself was established. Those defenders, quite often, are persecuted by their governments. This creates additional animosity, hatred, and violence, within the countries affected. That is one of the breeding places for terrorism.

We have continued our efforts, along with many of you, in trying to promote human rights. It has not been always successful. There are gross human rights violations still throughout the world, as many of you can testify directly. I read some of the testimony that you've given here already, with the advent of the attack on the United States known as 9/11, our country began to make, in my opinion, some very serious mistakes. It was natural for a nation with approximately 3,000 people killed in the worst terrorist attack perhaps in history to react in a way to defend our own people. But we have begun, in our country, and in our foreign policy, to work against the spirit of human rights.

As all of you know by now, without any public discussion, our government ordered about 1,200 United States citizens to be arrested secretly and held incommunicado in prison—sometimes with leg chains on them, refused the right of accusations to be presented about their alleged crimes, deprived of the right to counsel, deprived of the right to communicate with their own families. And they were kept that way for sometimes many months. Although most of them have now been released, the United States government has still refused to release the list of those who were persecuted. Almost of all them were found completely innocent. But this was an unprecedented thing in our country in after more than 200 years of protecting civil rights. We went to war, as you know, in Afghanistan, maybe for justifiable causes, and captured some people there who were on the opposite side in the war, from different countries in the world—some from Great Britain, some from Australia, some from Kuwait—our allies. We brought 600 of those to Guantanamo. It's a small enclave of, in effect, United States territory on the island of Cuba, and they are still being held there without official charge. They don't know what their crimes, or alleged crimes were. They have still been deprived of a right to counsel or to basic standards that have always applied to those captured in war.

We've been to war many times in our country—Vietnam, the first world war, the second world war and others that I need not name, the Gulf war, so-called, the first war against Iraq. We've never done that before or since—captured people and held them in cages afterward. I say these things, which you all know, to point out that this is a violation of the basic character of my country, and it's very disturbing to me. As we have done these things, which are known throughout the entire world, it has lowered the standard of what is the definition of human rights. It is giving, in effect, a blank check to governments that were inherently inclined to violate human rights already. We have in addition encouraged governments to tighten up on state control over freedom of speech and other human rights, which we all cherish. This is bad. But I think it's very important at this meeting that we're having here at The Carter Center not to single out the United States, because there are much worse violations in many countries in the world. We need to make sure that our voice is one of moderation and one of courageous but positive advice and counsel that others can look upon and not just an attack on my own country, which still preserves the right of defenders. We're not in any case in our country controlling the right of defenders. I made a major address at Georgia Tech, a great university here in Atlanta, and condemned these policies just as I'm doing this morning. This week former Vice President Al Gore made a superb speech in which he outlined these and other violations of human rights in a very open and provocative way. So our country still protects the right of people like me and Al Gore and others to defend the principles that we all espouse, so we shouldn't just single out the United States as the worst violator. It is not. It has departed radically from previous policies, which is very disturbing to us, but we should make sure that we don't just single out the United States for condemnation.

I understand that the group has already begun to work on a so-called Atlanta Declaration, which may hopefully encapsulate the recommendations for us to promulgate. I have already communicated with the secretary of state and with others in Washington to make an appointment for a representative number of this group, a small group, to meet with some of the leaders in Washington. So I think that our main purpose is not just to talk to each other, because we all agree on basic principles. There won't be very much debate among us, but the main thing is for us to have a stronger concerted voice.

My co-chairmen for this meeting was originally going to be Sergio Vieira de Mello. I talked to him several times about this conference. He was very enthusiastic about it. In fact even when he went to Iraq to represent the secretary-general directly, I talked to him on the phone. He said his first love was human rights, and although he was there to serve the Iraqi people for just a few months, he would be back here before the time for this conference. He is one of the heroes who has given his life for this purpose, and I think we should remember him as we proceed with our deliberations. After his death, the secretary-general appointed Bertrand Ramcharan to be the acting high commissioner on human rights. Berti has in the past been the deputy high commissioner for human rights. He has been assistant secretary-general of the United Nations, and he has served in the United Nations for 30 years. He's taught as an adjunct professor of international human rights law at Columbia University, and he's been a prolific author. I see he's written some 20 books. I've only written 18 books, so I'm still behind him in that respect. He

holds a doctorate in international law from the London School of Economics, and we are honored to have him here with us this morning. I'd like to now introduce Berti Ramcharan to make some remarks.