

The Carter-Menil Human Rights Prize

The 1988 State of Human Rights Address

The Honorable Jimmy Carter

Introduction

With the exception of a few nations along the Mediterranean shore, Egypt and Morocco especially, no president of the United States of America has ever visited Africa. I went there when I was president, just on brief visits, but in the last few years The Carter Center has become deeply involved in several of the nations of that continent.

In addition to human rights efforts, we are not proceeding to teach the small farmers of a number of countries how to grow more food grain to prevent the constant recurrence of massive suffering and starvation.

Norman Borlaug, a Nobel Laureate in the early 1970s for his work in the “Green Revolution,” is our senior agricultural advisor. Dr. Borlaug is convinced that we can have a “green revolution” in the area of Africa south of the Sahara Desert like the one he was able to bring about in Pakistan and India 15 or 20 years ago.

William Foege, former head of the Centers for Disease Control, the man who helped to orchestrate the eradication of smallpox and who is the director of our Carter Center, is trying to improve the health status of people on that continent and around the world.

Located just adjacent to this room a few yards away, for instance, is The Task Force for Child Survival which, under Dr. Foege’s direction, is responsible for the immunization of all the children in the world against polio, measles, diphtheria, typhoid, whooping cough, diarrhea, and other diseases.

We are working to reduce the threats of malaria, river blindness, and guinea worm in many countries. This has given us an insight into the continents of Africa and Asia in particular, which perhaps has never been enjoyed by any other president or former president of this country.

Today I will continue my policy, that Tom Buergethal helped to initiate, of presenting a summary of human rights. I have prepared a speech on that subject which is relatively brief.

The State of Human Rights Address

Forty years ago, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the international community committed itself to freedom, human dignity and equality for all. Today, four decades later, we honor a family – and through them millions of others – who continue to be denied the enjoyment of every one of these very rights.

The Sisulu family personify the suffering and courage of people who, because of the color of their skin and for no other reason, are denied what in the words of the Universal Declaration is their birthright as human beings: to be “free and equal in dignity and rights.” The suffering and indignity to which they and their compatriots are subjected demonstrate how much still remains to be done to bring our world up to the standards of the Universal Declaration. At the same time, the Sisulus’ commitment to freedom and equality is an inspiration to all men and women who believe in the nobility of the human spirit and the alleviation of pain.

Walter Sisulu, the father, has now been in prison for 24 years. Max Sisulu, who gave the stirring remarks a few minutes ago, has not seen his daddy in 25 years, and the chances of his ever seeing his father again are uncertain.

Two years ago, Zwelakhe Sisulu was sent to prison and placed in solitary confinement – without charge or trial – for his non-violent activities as a newspaper publisher. This is a former Nieman fellow at Harvard, recognized by many leading reporters for his qualities as a writer, as an independent thinker, and as a responsible human being. Eight days ago, South African authorities announced, possibly as a result of this award announcement, that Zwelakhe was being released. I had a very nice conversation with the South African ambassador in Washington, and he urged me to write a congratulatory note to President Botha of South Africa, which I did. Two days later I received a copy of the restraining orders that were issued at the time of Zwelakhe’s release. Nothing illustrates that racist government’s reprehensible policies more vividly than the order, signed by Adriaan Vlok, Minister of Law and Order. Listen to the chilling phrases of this document:

“To: Mr. Zwelakhe Sisulu

Conditions of Release

Under Security Emergency regulations you are hereby notified that your release from detention shall be subject to the conditions –

a) that you shall not, as from the date of your release, without the written consent of the Divisional Commander of the Security Branch of the South African Police for the Witwatersrand Division –

(1) take part in any manner whatsoever in any of the activities or acts of the following organizations, namely –

- UNITED DEMOCRATIC FRONT;
- NATIONAL EDUCATION CRISIS COMMITTEE;
- SOUTH AFRICAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES;
- DETAINEES PARENTS’ SUPPORT COMMITTEE;

- NATIONAL EDUCATION UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA;

(and five other similar organizations.)

[You shall not]

(2) be outside the boundaries of the magisterial district of Johannesburg at any time;

(3) be outside the boundaries of the premises situated at 820 Mncube Avenue, Dube, Soweto between the hours of 18h00 and 06h00;

(4) attend or stay present at any meeting consisting of ten or more persons (including yourself), convened or otherwise brought about for the purpose of discussing some or other matter;

(5) contribute, prepare, compile or transmit in any manner whatsoever any matter for publication in any publication – or assist in any manner whatsoever in the preparation, compilation or transmission of any matter for publication;

(6) take part in any interview with any journalist, news reporter, news commentator or new correspondent;

(7) be present on or enter upon any premises occupied by an educational institution;

(8) attend any gathering which has been convened, advertised or is otherwise brought about –

(1) to attack, criticize or protest against the system of policies or proposed acts or policies of the Government of the Republic of South Africa;

(2) to attack, criticize or protest against the system of local government as applied in the Republic of South Africa,

(b) that you shall, as from the date of your release, report daily to the officer in charge of the Charge Office at the Orlando Police Station, between 06h00 and 09h00 and also between 14h00 and 17h00, subject to such exemptions as the Divisional Commander of the Security Branch of the South African Police for the Witwatersrand Division may at any time authorize in writing.”

The order closes with a complex legal definition of “local authority.”

These chilling words reveal a repressive, immoral policy behind the legalisms of a government that has lost its moorings in civilization.

The Universal Declaration that we commemorate today has become the Magna Carta of the world’s human rights movement. The many treaties and institutions it has spawned have created an international climate that gives the struggle for human rights ever greater legitimacy and political force. This means that not only do all governments have a right to defend freedom, but

also a responsibility, a duty, to expose and correct human rights violations whenever and wherever they occur.

In this ceremony, my assignment is to give you an assessment of what has been achieved in the human rights field during this past year and to describe some urgent unmet needs. But first, let me be clear about one thing: as long as apartheid exists, as long as human beings are tortured, kept in detention without trial, made to disappear, denied basic needs, denied the right to practice their religion, forced to suffer because of their race, sex, religion or nationality, as long as massive violations of human rights take place anywhere on our globe, we cannot, we must not, remain silent. These are crimes against humanity, and they should be treated as such. There has been too much silence and too little indignation in the face of gross human rights abuses.

This year we also celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Genocide Convention. Drafted by the United Nations while the horrors of the Holocaust were still vividly in mind, this treaty was soon adopted by about one hundred nations. We are grateful that the United States Congress finally completed acceptance of the Genocide Convention a few weeks ago. Priority should not be given to joining the vast majority of other nations in accepting the international covenants on human rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the American Convention of Human Rights. We should adhere to international and regional treaties outlawing torture. We have not done any of these things. The decision to ratify these instruments should be our nation's New Year's resolution for 1989.

We have at last seen a cease-fire in the terribly costly war between Iran and Iraq, another encouraging development this year. The citizens of Chile voted in a referendum to end dictatorship and restore democracy. There are also promising developments in the long-standing efforts to bring about the departure of Cuban troops from Angola and South Africa's withdrawal from Namibia.

Some changes that President Gorbachev is bringing about in the Soviet Union are encouraging. There are hopeful signs in the recent visit to the United States of Andrei Sakharov, the leading Soviet human rights advocate and Nobel Peace Laureate, of increasing Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union, and the expressed willingness of the Soviet government to release religious and political prisoners, to permit freer worship, and to end the terrible practice of incarcerating political opponents in psychiatric institutions. If such policies of liberalization are genuine and continue in the Soviet Union, they should have a beneficial effect in other Warsaw Pact countries and on fuller compliance with human rights provisions of the Helsinki Accords.

The fact that former Czechoslovakian leader Alexander Dubcek is allowed to travel to Italy is a step forward, but his fear of speaking freely demonstrates that too much optimism about all of these developments is premature. It cannot be denied that *perestroika* and *glasnost* offer hope for peace and progress in human rights. The West must be imaginative in nurturing these changes.

This summer the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, formerly headed by Tom Buergenthal, who maintains his seat as a judge, rendered a judgement in which the government of Honduras was condemned to pay damages for disappearances that took place in that country under a prior regime. Honduras has declared that it will comply with the judgment. This case marks the first time in history that a government has been tried by an international tribunal for engaging in the systematic disappearance, torture, and death of political opponents. This judgement should send a clear message to all countries that engage in the practice of disappearance that their actions stand condemned by the international community.

Despite these good reports, I cannot really say that the human rights conditions in the world have improved significantly in 1988.

Last year I spoke quite optimistically about developments in the Americas and about the region's hope for a successful transition to democracy. Recent events there give cause for concern, however. This is true, especially, of the perpetuation of dictatorship in Haiti, a new wave of killings in El Salvador and Guatemala, the crackdowns on political opponents in Nicaragua, Paraguay and Panama, the apparent political and economic disintegration of Peru, and in general, the growing fear in a number of these countries that military coups are again a real possibility. We saw this in Argentina only last week. These conditions, the drug problem, and the tremendous strain that the mounting foreign debt is placing on many countries this hemisphere call for an imaginative U.S.-Latin American policy, designed to bring economic recovery to this region. Without such progress, freedom and democracy may be doomed.

The Iraqis' use of poison gas against the Kurds is reprehensible, and the senseless killings in Lebanon continue unabated. The unnecessarily harsh Israeli response to the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza has aroused worldwide condemnation, particularly among Jewish citizens of many countries, including those Israelis who deplore such practices. More than three hundred civilians have been killed, and Israeli authorities have stated that several thousand are being held in detention without trial. Not only does this play into the hands of the most obstructionist of the Arabs who want no peace with Israel, but it perpetuates more than two decades of military domination of an increasingly restive people. Both Jews and Arabs continue to suffer.

Parts of Asia and Africa are torn by racial, tribal and religious strife, and even the Soviet bloc is not immune to ethnic disturbances. The United Nations and other international organizations have too long neglected this problem. The time has come to focus greater attention on the protection of national, linguistic, religious, racial, and ethnic minorities.

The non-governmental human rights organizations that have sprung up in the past few decades perform a critical role in prodding governments to protect and promote some kinds of human rights. Amnesty International, lawyers' committees, the watch committees, the International League, and other monitors of oppression are the human rights conscience of the world

community and deserve our full support. They have helped transform the Universal Declaration into an instrument that oppressors find increasingly difficult to ignore when their people are deprived of their legal rights. This is admirable, but far from adequate. Many of us tend to relax behind limited efforts to enforce this narrow definition of human rights.

We must never forget that human rights include not just civil and political rights, but also the economic, social, and cultural rights that the Universal Declaration proclaims. The rights to food, shelter, and medical care – simply stated, the right to survive – are as worthy of protection as the rights to due process of law, to vote, or to freedom of expression. It must be recognized that political and civil rights are not safe for long in a society that fails to meet the economic and social needs of its people; and where civil and political rights are violated, other rights may not long be respected.

A civilized society is judged by how it treats its weakest members. It is therefore not inappropriate to measure countries and cultures by the adequacy of their response to illness, medical care, homelessness, and malnutrition, especially among the helpless, the very young, and the very old. Violations of human rights are most often seen as acts of commission that prevent others from exercising their freedom. It is time to look at the withholding of freedom by acts of avoidable omission. For example:

- Although polio vaccine has been in common use for thirty years, several thousand children will this week become paralyzed with this disease.
- Measles vaccine is available at 6 cents a dose on the international market, and yet tens of thousands of children will die this week from measles, just because we have not distributed the vaccine.
- During an average year, the world produces about 10 percent more food than is required for the total population to eat. Despite the surplus, acute and chronic malnutrition is a fact of life for many. By letting them starve, the world deprives these children of their freedom to live.

Concepts such as the pursuit of happiness and equality of opportunity are quintessentially American. Our country is known as a bastion of freedom, but we have been willing to accept increasing numbers of homeless in our own cities and an ever larger number of American children who go to bed hungry. To ignore this kind of suffering at home and abroad is to honor the excessively narrow perspective of what is meant by human rights.

Let me try to put the problem into perspective. Civil wars in parts of Africa cause massive suffering and cost hundreds of thousands of lives – innocent people condemned to death by governments that use the withholding of food as a weapon. We focus on the highly publicized cases involving incarceration of political activists, and we should do this. But in the bloody civil strife in Sudan alone, more than a quarter of a million people have died this year, and three million others are now homeless. Because of a lack of rudimentary medical

care, measles has killed more than half the children in regions around the refugee camps. Some humanitarian aid is offered, but these horrible conditions call for much stronger international condemnation and political action. So far, there is no effective international organization that addresses the root causes of this and other civil wars, some of which have reached genocidal proportions.

Given the massive violations of human rights that occur with increasing frequency in the context of revolutions and religious and ethnic strife, I am convinced now more than ever that the United Nations should establish the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights, with broad powers to deal with these large scale violations of human rights. Existing human rights institutions usually lack the authority and capacity to protect human lives in these situations.

The complicity of the medical profession in governmental practices of torture, and the use of psychiatry to keep political prisoners locked up in insane asylums has been widely documented. At the same time, it is an accepted fact that the medical profession can play an important role in protecting human rights by investigating violations and by sensitizing health professionals to their human rights obligations in all societies, whether repressive or not. Physicians for Human Rights, a group of American doctors, attempts to protect people, and particularly medical personnel, from abuse. It is high time that there be established a truly international organization of physicians for human rights. No other profession could do more. It is almost impossible for a government to practice consistent torture without doctors knowing about it, unless the government is willing for the tortured victims to die. I hope that by next year we shall see the establishment of such an international organization of doctors.

As a new president takes office in January in our country, it is appropriate for the United States to undertake a bipartisan reassessment of our human rights policy. The time has come to look at the implementation of this effort and determine how it can be made more effective, where greater cooperation between the Congress and the Executive is necessary, and what human rights initiatives might be taken jointly by us and our democratic friends and allies. Such an assessment was undertaken in Washington in the mid-1970s. A bipartisan human rights foreign policy review in 1989 would enable the incoming administration and the American people – indeed, the people of the world – to strengthen this nation's commitment to a world in which the Universal Declaration is respected.

In expressing our admiration and respect for the Sisulu family, let me voice our hope once more that they will soon be able to live in a society free of racial hatred. Let us work with them to create a world in which all people can exist together in freedom and in peace. Let us not rest until human rights are fully enjoyed by all of God's children.