

THE CARTER CENTER



OVERCOMING FEAR

*Final Statement of the Human Rights Defenders Forum
Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A.*

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We, human rights defenders from 31 countries, work with different strategies in different contexts for one common purpose: to protect and expand human freedom. The struggle for justice and equality is one we wage for all humanity, and we see in all regions of the world attacks on rights won over generations.

On every continent, we are experiencing rising fears, threats, and new risks to what has been achieved by those who came before us, and what we have won for ourselves.

Much of what we have shared in the past few days is familiar – problems we have faced for years. Marginalized people have long faced severe repression. Violence against women and girls continues unabated around the world, enabled by regressive dictates of religious and political institutions. Women human rights defenders remain under intense attack, and we are vilified, isolated, and stigmatized for our work; but we will not be deterred. We will challenge and overcome the weapon of fear.

We recognize we are in a new situation – the rise of populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism has changed our world. This is partly a result of growing distrust between the general public and political leaders who have failed to deliver economic policies that work for all. The world's economic order is failing humanity. When eight men own as much as half the world, this is a crisis. Market fundamentalism has resulted in policies that favor the extremely wealthy and promote the entrenchment of vested interests, including the global arms, extractive, financial, human trafficking, and other industries.

We need to understand and combat poverty as a structural issue and challenge policies that leave most of the world's people behind. Activists who challenge economic and corporate policies and practices risk attacks, including assassinations.

The exploitation of fear is fueling xenophobia. Political leaders are destroying generations of progress on rights in the name of national security or traditional values.

Those we thought our allies are disappearing. Media has sometimes turned against us, and our situation is too often met with indifference or worse.

But we are also encouraged to witness the response of widespread citizen engagement in many countries, as millions of people are rising-up to protest the new crisis. They are part of new movements refusing to be intimidated into silence, refusing to succumb to despondency. Together we will overcome fear and offer a new vision of freedom for all.

Our Requests for Political Leaders and Governments

We need you to recognize that advancing the rights of your people advances your strength as leaders of your nation and peoples. When rights are protected, societies thrive. When half of the population, women and girls, are excluded from decision-making, equal justice and opportunities, progress and democracy, are illusory. You have the power to foster the talent in your civil society and help expand the space for this valuable work.

You should reject legislation or other efforts that seek to restrict or obstruct our activities or our rights in the name of national security or economic progress. In a climate where human rights defenders are branded as “terrorists,” “criminals,” or “foreign agents,” we need you to help keep us safe and protected.

We need you to do no harm, and to not allow arguments of cultural relativism to undermine protection of the rights entitled to all people in the world. We need you to anchor your rhetoric and policies in positive values, to ensure that the rule of law is not replaced by the rule of force.

We need you to refuse to promote an agenda of hate and fear, and to not use the language of national security to suppress rights. We also need you to build a culture that isolates autocrats and holds human rights abusers accountable.

Our Hopes for the United Nations

There is only one institution in the world that offers the possibility for global cooperation for the betterment of all. The United Nations must be reformed to fulfill its promise to the peoples of the world. We are seeing the reversal of gains at national political levels as well as at the United Nations, where NGOs are being denied accreditation and shut out of decision-making and deliberations. Human rights defenders trying to engage with the U.N. are being targeted for reprisals. While the Universal Periodic Review and other human rights mechanisms have been painstakingly developed over decades, proper implementation of recommendations is rare.

Despite a lack of resources, civil society actors are prepared to co-operate with the U.N. to improve this record, often at personal risk, but must be reassured of the U.N.'s political will to follow through.

We need the U.N. itself to become fully transparent and accountable to those it represents, recognizing that it is not a private club of governments but a servant of the world's population.

To Our Fellow Civil Society Activists

We recognize that the new context is not just a time for action but also self-examination. We need to accept some uncomfortable truths, including that our base is too narrow. We need to show the effects of our work better and more often, and we need to offer people an effective, persuasive, positive vision of dignity and rights for everyone.

We need to find new alliances, including those that might be difficult for us to achieve; we need to be more imaginative than ever before. Locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally, we need to find new partners for support and new ways to support each other.

We also need to better understand and engage with protests and movements that are resisting the new populism and the mainstreaming of intolerance. It's time to break out of our silos, find out who else shares our values, and work with them. It's time we collaborate more closely with the labor and environmental movements.

We must explore where businesses and governments might be allies and not adversaries, approach financial institutions, find and learn how to work with new friends.

Religion can be a potent force for good or for ill. Working with religious leaders and communities who share our vision is more urgent than ever, especially as religion is weaponized by political and violent forces in a manner that instills fear in the public.

We need to be secure in our communications with each other and protect ourselves from and counter the new onslaught of propaganda.

Our Appeal to the Media

We are proud to recognize many journalists and others in the media as human rights defender colleagues. Their work has sustained our movement for decades and continues to expose violations and promote freedoms and rights. Many journalists have been murdered for their human rights work, and others continue to operate at great risk. We need to continue to support their work, and we need them to support ours. We should offer to help them to cover our work in a responsible, ethical way.

But the alarmingly powerful rise of a media that distorts the truth and offers fake news is a major part of the new crisis. We need those in the media to refuse to push an agenda of fear and to help establish a responsible, credible media.

We will work with journalists, artists, filmmakers, bloggers and others to counter the false reality being pushed to communities across the world, and we understand the benefits of working with younger journalists to help cultivate a longer-term culture of human rights.

Messages for the Public and Our Communities

We work for the benefit of all — for victims of state abuse and for society at large. We refuse to give in to the imagined fears and false truths that have enabled the rise of authoritarianism.

We know we need to offer a persuasive, positive vision of our work and to show more often and more clearly evidence of our service to the common good.

We commit to listen to what you need from us, to work more closely with you, and to close the space between us.

Requests for the Community of Philanthropists and Donors

We call for an expansion and restructuring of the current philanthropic community. Everyday citizens, including those who represent communities impacted by human rights violations, are the most important source of financial support for human rights defenders. Funding the promotion and protection of human rights needs to be a local priority as well as a global concern.

As core members of civil society, we believe philanthropists should regard and support our work as part of a continuous struggle, not as a project. We recognize that the work of philanthropists is also threatened by the new attacks and we need to adapt together to overcome this assault.

Because local sources of funds are not always available, human rights defenders need support from external sources. We ask funders to develop flexible, core long-term funding commitments to those working with local communities, especially women-led organizations and movements. We urge donors, international organizations, and others to celebrate and support human rights defenders whose work is supported by resources raised locally. Funding policies that withhold assistance because of an exaggerated concern over contact with terrorist groups are self-defeating. The best way to defeat terrorism is to support grassroots human rights efforts.

Messages for the Private Sector

We recognize that private sector actors can be allies in the promotion and defense of human rights. We have seen technology companies speak out against harmful immigration policies. We understand that businesses create economic opportunities and play a leading role in job creation. The private sector can be an engine for the enjoyment of economic rights. We know the power of the private sector to promote rights, in its behavior, and recognize the potential of consumer choice to select products created with high labor and ethical standards. We need the private sector to be our allies and support our work with financial resources, pro bono work, advice, and access to power. Together we need to see that respect for human rights is good for the “bottom line.”

We Resolve...

...to break the fear by staying engaged and connected. Our struggle for freedom is a long one, and we must recognize that none are safe when hard-won basic human rights are unraveling all around us. We must redouble our commitment to the principles adopted nearly 70 years ago in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The promise of that great consensus is still unfulfilled and is, in fact, slipping through our fingers. We must uphold those ideals in our everyday lives and make what was written in the ashes of World War II a reality for all.