
SPEECH ON HUMAN RIGHTS BY HUGH V. SIMON, JR., U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Following is the text of a speech presented to DISAM students on 20 April 1983 by Hugh V. Simon, Jr., Deputy Director, Office of Policy and Programs, Bureau of Human Rights, U.S. Department of State. The text is reprinted in its entirety for the information of our readers.

Human rights is an idea, a set of feelings or beliefs about the way things should be that we try to make happen in the world. Americans have been interested in human rights since this country was first settled. Human rights, the rights of mankind, were enshrined in our Declaration of Independence and in our Constitution. While our own internal system of assuring the protection of individual rights has developed and grown over the years -- our human rights protection has improved -- we Americans feel naturally very strongly that this country stands for such things as individual liberty, freedom, and human rights.

Human rights as a major concept in world affairs began to be addressed during the formation of the United Nations, in the aftermath of World War II. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the preamble to the United Nations Charter, and the subsequent conventions on human rights codified in international instruments a series of ideals and concepts shared by many world leaders who wished to try to influence the conditions for protection of liberty. That some of the "rights" mentioned included things that are better called "goals" or "aspirations" should not detract from the importance of the effort during the late 1940's to bring international political influence to bear upon moral and humanitarian questions. Of course, the Geneva Conventions on the rules of war and conflict had been in existence since the late 19th century, but the approach to individual liberties on this scale was something new.

International agreements on human rights have been, as we know, unable to prevent human rights violations from taking place. Some countries, including the Soviet Union in recent years, subsequently incorporated virtually word for word provisions from international human rights covenants into their constitutions. But, as we also know, the existence of words on paper may be totally irrelevant to the actual situation. In the Soviet Union, where the control of the state over individual liberties is nearly total, human rights are crushed daily. In other countries in the world, other repressive governments would point with grandiloquence to their constitutions, while allowing political killings and torture. And, as if to make matters worse, the past several decades have seen the Soviet Union and many third world countries distort the meaning of human rights into requiring that economic rights be fulfilled before political rights are respected and that such things as the New World Information Order are justified in giving governments complete control of information in their respective countries. In other words, the concept of economic rights has been used to justify

dictatorial control by communist and third world governments alike and the right of free information has been twisted into a call for the abolition of press reports as a means of expression.

This is not to say that international human rights agreements are bad, but only to point out that they can be meaningless, or at worst, used for distortion and cover-up. Agreements can be useful but we must not expect too much from them.

There is a related danger. If one administers a human rights policy which relies primarily on public rhetoric, one is asking for trouble or is not serious about human rights, or both. We tried a policy which used exhortation as its primary instrument before, but discovered that we were alienating many countries in the name of human rights, while accomplishing little in the way of improvement.

We have now a government committed to holding human rights at the core of its foreign policy, and administration that is serious about achieving improvements in human rights. You may question this, especially if you do not stop to look behind the popular images of foreign policy put out by some newspaper and television writers who do not bother to look carefully at what we are trying to accomplish. For example, a strong popular impression is that El Salvador is a hopeless case of human rights abuse and that the United States seems unable or unwilling to do anything to improve the situation. This is patently false. Certainly the situation is not good, but it is improving. The level of violence has dropped. While a guerrilla war is being conducted, violence against non-combatants has been reduced markedly since our assistance began three years ago.

The Salvadoran system of administration of justice is not operating well, a real problem which needs to be dealt with, but we are examining ways in which we could be helpful to the Salvadoran authorities on this point. The Attorney General has just returned from a trip to Central America and will be involved in this process.

There is progress in the program of land redistribution, through which more than twenty percent of all arable land has been transferred in three years. About 450,000 people have been direct beneficiaries of the program; there is a constituency for the belief that the years of economic injustice can be corrected.

The United States Government is actively discussing these and other areas which bear on human rights with the Salvadoran Government. It is in both the immediate and long-term interest of both countries to address human rights problems there, and we are confident that, if we sustain our efforts, the situation will continue to improve.

I should add one more point on El Salvador. The Salvadoran Government is committed to holding elections this fall. The turnout for the last elections, even in the face of a guerrilla offensive, was 80 per cent. The Salvadoran Government has made it clear

that any party which wishes to renounce violence can take part in the elections. Our government supports this electoral process strongly, for we believe that it is through the protection of democratic institutions, such as free elections, that human rights can be best protected. If the electoral process works, the people have a voice in how they are governed; citizens do not tolerate a leader who tortures or who does not allow individual freedoms. Thus we believe we are pursuing a realistic and constructive human rights policy on El Salvador as we work to bolster the process of free elections and democratic institutions.

I have given you a current example of the United States using its foreign policy to help increase respect for human rights. The El Salvador situation, by its very nature, illustrates how complex the problem of having human rights in foreign policy can be. There seems to be basic agreement on the ends, or goals, of our foreign policy in El Salvador, but over the means, the tactics to use in getting from here to there, we Americans constantly have differences.

On the one hand, there are those who believe that if the government of a country is engaged in violations of human rights, the only correct response is to hold them at arm's length, and have little or nothing to do with them. The problem with this tactic is that it ignores the circumstances within which human rights violations are taking place and it bears no responsibility for the consequences of our policy. The Dutch call this "ostrich style politics," or putting one's head in the sand and ignoring the problem. If, however, we are serious about using our foreign policy to improve human rights, we must take a more encompassing approach.

On the other hand, then, there is a considerable body of opinion in the United States that recognizes the complexity in administering a human rights policy. Supporters of this means realize that maintaining a purist's attitude toward the intense network of national, societal and personal relationships and animosities which make up the situation in Central America, for example, is only abnegating responsibility; it is "ostrich style politics." The more realistic observers see that the conflict in El Salvador is hardly limited to El Salvador, but that the guerrillas are supported with weapons, supplies, tactical military advice and propaganda efforts by Nicaragua and Cuba. The headquarters for the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL) is not in El Salvador, but in Nicaragua. Thus, people who take a more realistic view of things see that to look at the cause of the Salvadoran conflict as being the fault of the Salvadoran Government is to be hasty and to ignore the complexity of the situation. It is even worse to then draw the conclusion that we should try to ignore the problem.

Supporters of the more realistic course know that if we are interested in human rights for people in Central America, we must patiently follow a policy of: (1) working quietly with the authorities in El Salvador to reduce violence. We are engaged in a constant full and frank discussion with Salvadoran officials. (2) Using

public pressure when necessary, but drawing attention to all aspects of the problem, including guerrilla violence and sabotage. (3) Showing the extent of human rights abuses in the neighboring country, which supports the violence in El Salvador and then claims that human rights of Salvadorans are being violated. In other words, when we look squarely at the problem, we see that while the Nicaraguan government violates the rights of its people at home, it tries to export its methods to El Salvador, where the guerrillas are waging a war against the people. The Nicaraguans have ended press freedom, are suppressing the church, have erased basic legal protections for those who try to speak out in favor of democracy, have forcibly deported Miskito Indians and destroyed their villages, and are holding numerous political prisoners. (4) We must work to build the institutions of democracy. It is through the working of democratic institutions that human rights can receive the best protection. To be dependent upon a single ruler or committee for the protection of human rights is to be subject to the whim of the ruler or to suffer a loss of these rights if the ruler changes. The institutions of democracy such as free elections, independent judiciary, free labor unions, political parties, independent churches and independent centers of learning are the forces which keep the observance of human rights intact. Any human rights policy which seriously looks at the future must attempt to build these institutions.

Thus, as the Secretary of State said last week in Dallas, "If we walk away from this challenge, we will have let down not only all those in Central America who yearn for democracy, but we will have let ourselves down. We cannot be for freedom and human rights only in the abstract. If our ideals are to have meaning, we must defend them when they are threatened." Let me end with another quote, from President Reagan last month: "Human rights," he said, "means working at problems, not walking away from them."