

Safeguarding Human Rights

By

President Ronald Reagan

[The following are remarks by President Reagan at a Washington, D.C., ceremony commemorating Bill of Rights Day, and Human Rights Day and Week, on December 10, 1985. Also included is the text of the President's proclamation.]

Today we mark the 37th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document to which virtually every nation on earth subscribes. It is a day for us to take stock, to survey the globe with an eye not so much to words, as to actual deeds, to measure the world against the noble assertions of the Universal Declaration, and to reaffirm our commitment to the cause of human dignity.

America has, since its founding, been a refuge for those suffering under the yoke of oppression. A belief in the dignity of man and government by the consent of the people lies at the heart of our national character and the soul of our foreign policy. I had the pleasure of explaining that to a gentleman in Geneva not so long ago. [The reference here is to Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev.] But here the difference is our documents, such as the Constitution, say we, the people, will allow government to do the following things.

Today, more than ever, we're proud to be champions of freedom and human rights the world over. So, in observing Human Rights Day, we celebrate our commitment to the beliefs and moral teachings on which our own nation is founded, a belief in liberty, in the dignity of man, and in the inalienable rights of free men and women to choose their destinies.

We have not hesitated when these rights and freedoms have been threatened. Last month on Veteran's Day, I visited the graves of our soldiers who gave their lives so that the rest of us might know the blessings of peace and freedom. Our sons, brothers, and fathers also lie in cemeteries and fields from Flanders to Manila, under undying testimony to our determination that these rights shall not perish.

We've learned from history that the cause of peace and human freedom is indivisible. Respect for human rights is essential to true peace on earth. Governments that must answer to their peoples do not launch wars of aggression. That's why the American people cannot close their eyes to abuses of human rights and injustice, whether they occur among friend or adversary or even on our own shores. And we must be particularly appalled that, on the threshold of the 21st century, when man has made gigantic strides in opening the universe of space and finding cures for dread diseases, millions of our fellow men still suffer the grossest abuses. There are regimes--some friendly, some adversarial--that engage in frequent violations of human rights. There are other regimes which by their very nature are built upon the denial of human rights and the subordination of the individual to the state.

In Afghanistan and Cambodia, for example, alien dictatorships, with the support of foreign occupation troops, subject their peoples to unceasing warfare. Today, 6 years after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, up to 120,000 Soviet troops remain. They have slaughtered innocent women and children. They have employed poison gas. And they have loaded toys with small explosives, an attempt to demoralize the people by crippling Afghan children. Some 3.5 million Afghans, fully one-fourth of the prewar population, have been forced to flee to Pakistan and Iran.

The communist rulers of Vietnam have launched vicious attacks upon Cambodian refugees, refugees who were fleeing a communist regime in Cambodia itself, which led to the deaths of up to one-quarter of the entire Cambodian population.

In Ethiopia a Marxist government has used famine to punish large segments of its own population. Vice President Bush visited a camp for Ethiopian refugees in the Sudan last March. Men and women of all ages were dying; but the Vice President told me there's something unbearably painful about seeing the eyes of the children, the huge sad eyes of starving children. And the peoples and governments of the democracies have responded generously to those pleas with tangible evidence of our concern.

In the Western Hemisphere, where so much progress toward democracy has been made, Cuba stands out as the country where institutionalized totalitarianism has consistently violated the rights of the citizens. Unfortunately, the Sandanista regime in Nicaragua seems determined to embark on the same course.

On three continents we see brave men and women risking their lives in anticommunist battles for freedom. We cannot and will not turn our backs on them. This year the House of Representatives has heeded their call and voted aid to the freedom fighters in Cambodia, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua, and repealed a ban on aid to freedom fighters in Angola.

Elsewhere we have seen considerable progress toward observance of human rights. In El Salvador, Grenada, and Honduras, freely selected--or elected governments, I should say -- represent the best hope of their peoples for the future. And just over the last weekend, a new civilian president was elected in Guatemala--that's the first time in 15 years. We laud those achievements, but our concern remains for those who are still captive and oppressed. This is where our voices must speak for justice, for the force of world opinion can and does make a difference.

One of the more tragic cases today is that of the Baha'i, whose leaders are with us today. The Government of Iran is engaged in rampant religious persecution, especially against the Baha'is. Since 1979, 198 Baha'is have been put to death, 767 are imprisoned, some 10,000 made homeless, and over 25,000 forced to flee their country. Only the continued world outcry can help bring an end to their suffering.

In South Africa the inhuman policy of apartheid continues. The declaration of a state of emergency has given the police in that country essentially unlimited powers to silence critics of the government. Thousands of South African citizens have been detained without cause--or charge, I should say--and denied even elementary judicial protection. I have said that apartheid is abhorrent. It is time that the Government of South Africa took steps to end it and to reach out for compromise and reconciliation to end the turmoil in that strife-torn land.

In Chile and the Philippines, too, we have shown our strong concern when our friends deviate from established democratic traditions.

In Eastern Europe the hopes and aspirations of millions of people for religious freedoms, civic rights, remain alive despite years of repression. The Solidarity labor union is still outlawed in Poland, and the Polish regime has once again moved to restrict the few freedoms that its people still enjoy. In Romania religious persecution includes the destruction of Bibles, while in Bulgaria the repression of the Turkish minority and the Islamic faith is witness to the unyielding denial of the basic freedom of speech, assembly, and religion in this region.

I addressed human rights in my meetings with General Secretary Gorbachev, and I made it very clear to him that human rights are an abiding concern of the American people. We had a long

and confidential discussion, and at the conclusion of our meetings, we declared a joint statement that humanitarian issues would be resolved in a humanitarian spirit. Americans will be watching hopefully to see whether that pledge is observed.

Make no mistake about it, human rights will continue to have a profound effect on the U.S.-Soviet relationship as a whole, because they are fundamental in our vision of an enduring peace. President Lincoln once called America the last, best hope of man on earth. Mr. Lincoln's remark has special poignancy today, when American determination and strength are central to the peace and freedom of the entire democratic world. It is, therefore, incumbent upon us to work for the expansion of freedom throughout the world.

In this great effort, my friends, I deeply believe we have a good cause for hope. Evidence of the triumph of the ideal of freedom and respect for human rights can be seen in every corner of the globe, and this is because freedom is not only morally right but practical and beneficial. Indeed, governments that rest upon the consent of the governed and the rule of law are more successful in fulfilling their people's aspirations for a better life. Democratic government and economic freedom have turned a number of small nations into economic giants. It even appears to have roused a giant nation from its economic slumber.

Permit me in closing to return to Mr. Lincoln: "What defined America, what gave our nation its purpose and mission," he once said, "was something in that Declaration of Independence giving liberty not only to the people of this country, but hope to the world. It was that which gave promise that in due time, the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men."

Well, let us always be true to that distinctly American cause. Let us never cease to work and pray that the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men.

Thank you, and God bless you, and I will now sign the proclamation designating December 10th as Human Rights Day and December 15th, 1985, as Bill of Rights Day, and the week beginning today [December 10] is now recognized officially as Human Rights Week.

Proclamation 5420

December 10, 1985

On December 15, 1791, the adoption of the first ten amendments to the Constitution of the United States--the Bill of Rights--gave legal form to the noble principles which our Founding Fathers had set forth in the Declaration of Independence as the very basis for the birth of our Nation.

Benjamin Franklin, then 81 years old, in a moving address, reminded the members of the Constitutional Convention that it was God who had seen them safely through the War of Independence and that it was only through His "kind Providence" that they were able to meet in peace to shape "the means of establishing . . . future national felicity. . . . And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice," Franklin asked, "is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?"

Mindful of this, and deeply convinced that fundamental human rights are not a concession from the state but a gift of God, the Founding Fathers knew that government has a solemn obligation to safeguard those rights. That is why they were at pains to devise and ordain a constitutional system that would ensure respect for the dignity and uniqueness of every human being. Thus, they brought into existence a form of limited government--representative democracy--whose powers are circumscribed by law and whose legitimacy derives from the consent of the governed. For the first

time in the history of nations, a written Constitution based on the inalienable God-given rights of the individual was promulgated.

It is with sincere thanksgiving that we reflect on the successful efforts of those wise patriots of two hundred years ago who laid the political foundations of our beloved Nation, and also to those millions of citizens ever since who have cherished and defended the Constitution and the principles it embodies. Many have given their lives on the field of battle so that freedom and human dignity might live both at home and abroad; let us never forget our debt to them or fail to honor their sacrifice and courage.

One hundred and fifty-seven years after the adoption of our Bill of Rights, the fundamental concepts enshrined in our Constitution were internationally acknowledged as applying to all peoples when the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948.

Although we can take heart at the number of nations in which human rights are respected and real progress towards democratic self-government is being made, a disturbingly large number of governments continue to commit serious abuses of human rights. In the tradition of our forefathers, we protest against these abuses wherever they occur. We condemn the practice of torture, racial and religious persecution, and the denial of the right of free expression and freedom of movement.

The United States will never cease to be in the forefront of the noble battle for human rights. We have committed our resources and our influence to efforts aimed at extending throughout the world the rights we enjoy, rights which are rightly the prerogative of all people. This Nation must remain and will remain a beacon of hope for all who strive for human dignity. There is no better way of showing our gratitude for our inheritance of liberty.

We believe it is a right, not a privilege, to be allowed to speak freely; to assemble peacefully; to acquire and dispose of private property; to leave the country of one's residence; to form trade unions; to join or not to join groups and associations; and to worship according to one's conscience. Experience teaches us that the best check against tyranny is a government of the people in which leaders are elected in fair and open balloting and where the government's powers are subject to constitutional limitations. We pray that one day all nations of the earth may share with us the joys and rewards of living in free societies, and we resolve not to rest from our labors until the most noble longings of the human spirit, those for freedom of belief and expression, are fully realized.

During this commemorative week, let us rededicate ourselves to the advancement of human rights throughout the world, recalling the words of Alexander Hamilton that "natural liberty is a gift of the beneficent creator to the whole human race . . . and cannot be wrested from any people without the most manifest violation of justice."

Now, Therefore, I, Ronald Reagan, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim December 10, 1985, as Human Rights Day, and December 15, 1985, as Bill of Rights Day, and I call upon all Americans to observe the week beginning December 10, 1985, as Human Rights Week.

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand this 10th day of December, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighty-five, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and tenth.

[Ronald Reagan]