
Promoting Democracy and Human Rights

By

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[The following are excerpts of the remarks at a High-Level Segment of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Geneva, Switzerland, March 16, 2004.]

Distinguished colleagues, I am pleased to be here in Geneva to address the opening of the 60th Session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. As Under Secretary of State, I have devoted much attention to promoting democracy and human rights around the world — it is a struggle that is close to my heart. I have also had the chance to travel to countries where tyranny and abuse of human rights have given way to freedom and respect for the individual. Last month, I visited Afghanistan and met with many groups of women there. One need only see the hope and joy that comes from their newfound freedom and witness their nascent democracy, to know that the work we can do for human rights in this forum is worthy and of manifest importance. Whether or not we are effective can directly impact the lives of millions of people around the globe. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights should be a place for nations to speak out in favor of these universal principles and condemn those who repeatedly and egregiously violate them.

We are here to fulfill the responsibility bestowed on us by the people of our nations to stand up for the principles that men and women everywhere hold dear — the universal and inalienable rights to life, liberty, and security of person. These and other rights are spelled out clearly in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and there should be no doubt that they are indeed universal they are the God-given rights of everyone, everywhere. Each of our nations, in becoming a member of the United Nations and seeking membership on this Commission has pledged to uphold these sacred rights. But it is clear that there are many nations in the world that do not protect the high principles of the *Declaration*, just as it is clear to many that this Commission has not always fully lived up to its mandate to draw attention to human rights violations, call on abusers to end their practices, and help those on the path of change. Thus we have reached a time for choosing. Over the next several weeks, we can choose either to take seriously the mandate we have been given and stand up for those around the world who yearn for liberty like the Burmese and Cuban people whose aspirations are symbolized by Aung San Sun Kyi and Oswaldo Payá, or we can choose to find reasons for inaction or silence. Let us seize this opportunity. Now, we have the chance to do something great both for our own nations, and for people everywhere. Let us fight for the greatest asset of all freedom.

The *Universal Declaration* states that human rights abuses have outraged the conscience of mankind. It also notes that rectifying these abuses will promote the development of friendly relations between nations. Herein lies an often overlooked fact of the human rights debate. Standing up for the rights of the oppressed is not only an act of charity, nor is it solely an act of conscience. Democratic nations can promote their own interests by seeing to it that respect for human rights expands around the globe, because nations that cherish these values are far less likely to threaten the peace through aggression or internal instability. As freedom advances, all democratic nations become more secure.

That is why the Community of Democracies is such an important initiative. The Community is a global network that brings together new and old democracies to bolster representative government, to share experiences, and to coordinate policies in areas of common interests. It can help newly freed countries develop their democratic institutions and ensure that those still under the yoke of tyranny do not struggle alone.

President Bush has emphasized the responsibility that democracies have in advancing freedom throughout the world and has made liberty a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy. The United States believes that countries can best develop when their citizens are free to realize their full potential. The world is safer when countries are governed by leaders that respect the rule of law and human rights.

As President Bush has said, "We believe that liberty is the design of nature; we believe that liberty is the direction of history. We believe that human fulfillment and excellence come in the responsible exercise of liberty. And we believe that freedom — the freedom we prize — is not for us alone, it is the right and the capacity of all mankind. That is why America and many other democratic nations will continue the fight for human rights." Over the past year, there have been some important achievements for human rights:

- In Kenya, an elected government made impressive strides.
- Qatar has a new constitution and its government has worked hard to increase political participation.
- Guatemala successfully completed its third peaceful and democratic transfer of power.
- Morocco's new family code dramatically improves the status of women.

By fulfilling our obligation to condemn human rights abuses in this Commission, we are not disengaging from or isolating the nations we criticize. On the contrary, the hallmark of effective diplomacy is candor. When it comes to human rights violations, we ought to be open and frank with each other especially in this forum. Offering criticism is not necessarily counterproductive; it can be an important step forward in recognizing problems and identifying solutions.

Ideas matter, but action is essential. Over the past two decades, freedom and democracy have taken hold around the globe. Millions of people who once lived in tyranny are now free. Freedom is not merely a Western concept reserved for a handful of states and people, but a universal right of mankind. Accordingly, this body should stand up for those who seek freedom around the world, such as the Tibetans who seek cultural and religious autonomy, and the Belarussians who long to join a free Europe.

Apartheid in South Africa ultimately ended in large measure due to international pressure. Can anyone in this room seriously argue that the people of South Africa would be better off had the international community not spoken out forcefully against apartheid? The Commission passed its first country specific resolution on South Africa. It agreed on the need to highlight human rights abuses there. Today, we see the result millions of freed South Africans.

Those of us who have struggled for and have gained freedom, respect human rights, and know what good governance and democracy mean must stand up for those activists who seek freedom around the world. As members of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, it is our responsibility. We are prepared to stand together with other democracies to ensure that the democratic values and principles that govern our countries are protected and promoted in this body.

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights should be a place for nations to speak out in favor of these universal principles and condemn those who repeatedly and egregiously violate them. Here, in Geneva, we have the opportunity, the privilege, the obligation, to make a real difference in the lives of millions of people. In doing so, we serve not only them, but we can make the world a better, safer, more prosperous place for every nation. As members of this Commission, we have a decision to make. I urge this session to do the right thing. Let us back up our words of support for human rights with real action.