

**Opening Remarks of Secretary of State John Kerry  
Presentation of 2014 State Department Country Reports  
On Human Rights Practices  
June 25, 2015**

Hello everybody and thanks for being here as we release our Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014.

I want to begin by thanking Tom Malinowski and his entire team for producing reports that reflect a vast amount of objective research and that will provide a uniquely valuable resource for anyone who cares about justice and law.

The message at the heart of these reports is that countries do best when their citizens enjoy fully the rights and freedoms to which they are entitled. This isn't just a hopeful theory; it's reality. After all, we live at a time when access to knowledge and openness to change are essential. In such an era, no country can fulfill its potential if its people are held back or beaten down by repression.

Now, we understand that some governments may take issue with these reports, including such extreme cases as North Korea and Syria, but also governments with whom we work more closely. But let me tell you something; the discomfort these reports cause does more to reinforce than to undermine their value and credibility. Truth cannot successfully be evaded or denied, but it can be changed. And so our advice to any leader who is upset by our findings is to recognize that the way to alter what the world thinks is to modify what you do. That is advice we give to ourselves as well, because when human rights is the issue, every country – including the United States -- has room to improve. The path to global respect begins at home.

So these reports give governments an added incentive to honor the rights and dignity of their citizens; they also equip interested observers with an arsenal of facts. Within these pages are the stories of imprisoned pro-democracy activists; journalists jailed for telling the truth; members of religious minorities persecuted for practicing their faith; civil society leaders harassed for daring to speak up; and

young women and girls who – because of their gender – are denied an education, kidnapped, or abused.

There are other stories, too, because these reports get better and more comprehensive each year. The traditional principles of free speech, religious liberty, and equal protection remain at the center of our policy. But we have gradually expanded our reporting to include human trafficking, Internet freedom, and the rights of persons with disabilities and the LGBTI community.

We have also begun to highlight the profoundly harmful impact that corruption and poor governance have on human rights. No person anywhere should have to pay a bribe just to open a business, or to get a driver's license, or to have their day in court, or to sell a basket of fruit on the street. Corruption is a threat to society not only because of the larceny it embodies but also because of the cynicism it feeds; and that matters because when trust in government is lost, other and more harmful forces may try to fill the gap.

In this connection, no development has been more disturbing than the emergence of such groups as Daesh, Al-Qai'da, Boko Haram, and al-Shabaab. The litany of human rights crimes for which these terrorists are responsible has become all too familiar, but no less shocking – murder, torture, rape, religious persecution, slavery, and more. Make no mistake; the world community must confront and defeat these groups – and coercive measures are an essential part of that effort.

But at the same time, we have to understand that the terrorist presence doesn't give authorities a license to use violence indiscriminately; we can't rescue a village from Daesh or Boko Haram by destroying it. And terrorism is not a legitimate excuse to lock up political opponents, diminish the rights of civil society, or pin a false label on activists who are engaged in peaceful dissent. Practices of this type are not only unjust; they play directly into the hands of terrorists. When the pathways to non-violent change are closed; the road to extremism becomes more inviting. And given all the suffering we have seen in recent years, that is simply unacceptable.

Terrorism is a grave threat to human rights; conflicts are another. For evidence, we have only to turn to the 2014 country reports for such nations as the Central African Republic, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine, which has been victimized by its Russian neighbor. Today, an estimated 230 million people live in areas of strife; we are experiencing a crisis in food security; the number of refugees has reached a record level; UNICEF called 2014 one of the most disastrous years ever for children; and in Yemen, Burundi and elsewhere, conflict and civil strife have grown even worse in 2015.

The persistence of terrible bloodshed is a challenge to us all to strengthen our institutions and political will so that we can do a better job of deterring aggression, holding accountable those who commit atrocities, identifying potential crises, and stopping outbreaks of violence before they begin.

Finally, it's always worth asking – why do we care? Why do we Americans care whether the rights of others are respected?

Certainly, in an interconnected world, injustice anywhere is – to quote Dr. King – a threat to justice everywhere. And there can be no doubt that our citizens will do better and feel safer in a world where the values we cherish are widely upheld.

But there is also, I think, an even deeper reason. Because when human rights tragedies are supplanted by human rights victories, the very idea of progress becomes less rhetorical and more real. What do I mean by that?

Well – consider a couple of questions.

First, is there a more hopeful measure of civilization's advance than the abolition of slavery, the enfranchisement of women, the end of apartheid, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the broadening recognition of minority rights?

Second, is there a more meaningful agenda for the future than the shrinking of bigotry, the curtailment of conflict, the defeat of terrorism, the prevention of genocide, and a fuller commitment to the rights and dignity of every woman, man, and child?

Why do we care?

Because respect for human rights provides the truest mirror we have of ourselves – the most objective test of how far we have come over the centuries and how far we still have to go. I realize that’s placing a lot of weight on what is, after all, just an annual report – but I think the description fits. And I hope it will inspire us – between this year and next – to take more steps – and hopefully giant steps – in the direction of true justice, wider decency, and peace.

Thank you, and now I’m pleased to yield the floor to Assistant Secretary of State Tom Malinowski.

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