



**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing**  
**Human Rights: Taking Stock and Looking Forward**

**Thursday, December 8, 2016**  
**3:30 – 5:00 PM**  
**HVC-200 Capitol Visitor Center**

**Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery**

Good afternoon and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's briefing on the state of human rights around the world, and the challenges we face going forward.

I want to thank our six very distinguished panelists for joining us today, and express my appreciation to Steve Rickard for agreeing to moderate our discussion. It's a pleasure to see all of you again.

This will be the Commission's last event of the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress. Unfortunately, as we've seen in the 22 hearings and more than 40 briefings we've done during the two sessions of this Congress, there is no shortage of serious human rights abuses to address. Each country is different, but we've seen some common problems:

- the devastating impact of armed conflict on civilian populations;
- the rise or consolidation in power of authoritarian leaders who fear an empowered citizenry;
- the persistent intolerance and scapegoating of minority ethnic and religious communities, often leading to violence;
- the distorting impact of corruption and kleptocracy, and the ways these intersect with and enable authoritarian impulses and human rights violations.

In whatever country or locale where these situations occur, we learn about what's happening because an individual or a group of people decides to find out about an injustice and denounce those responsible. Those who speak out may be journalists or bloggers; they may be

community, social, religious or political leaders; they may be lawyers dedicated to defending others; or they may just be common folks who get fed up and decide to act.

By speaking out, all of these people become human rights defenders, and increasingly, all around the world, they themselves become targets. Too often, they are beaten in the streets while peacefully protesting, or detained without charges, or imprisoned on bogus charges and denied due process, or disappeared, or stigmatized, or killed. Depending on the country, we may be talking about a few dozen cases, or hundreds or thousands. What all of the victims of these tactics share is that they dared to stand up for their rights or the rights of others.

Cases like this are brought to our attention constantly. This week a letter is circulating in this body to call attention to the deaths of 52 human rights defenders in Colombia since the beginning of the year, and attacks against another 35, most in rural areas. We're seeing a crackdown on journalists working with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Turkmenistan, and threats against their families – and an unprecedented wave of repression against media workers in Turkey. I work with two prisoners of conscience, Nabeel Rajab in Bahrain and Raif Badawi in Saudi Arabia, who are deprived of their freedom because they speak their minds. And the list goes on and on.

The widespread tendency to attack human rights defenders is a major problem because they are the first line of defense against human rights abuses. Without them, the rest of us would be much worse off. The efforts both of governments and non-state actors to silence human rights defenders – to go after the messengers – is one of the challenges we will be discussing here today.

A second very insidious and difficult problem that has worsened dramatically since September 11, 2001, is the erosion of compliance with fundamental human rights laws and norms and with international humanitarian law – not only by non-state actors like terrorist groups, but by the very governments charged with defending these laws and norms in the international realm. It's not only ISIS that purposefully attacks civilians; it's also the Syrian and Russian governments. It's the Houthi rebel forces and the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. It's the targeting of medical facilities, the provoking of famine, the return of torture and slavery, the people forced to flee, the destruction of cultural relics, the ethnic cleansing that literally bleeds into genocide.

Often the states that use these tactics voted for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights back in 1948 and have ratified at least some international human rights conventions, and so they have a legal and moral obligation to uphold them. Yet just a few months ago, the UN General Assembly found itself compelled to pass a resolution reminding its member states that medical facilities and personnel are protected under the laws of war -- but passing that resolution did not put an end to the illegal attacks, nor the impunity that surrounds them. What we call the “international community” has struggled to respond, much less prevent, war crimes and crimes

against humanity that are occurring before our very eyes. This is the second challenge we will talk about today.

This coming Saturday, December 10<sup>th</sup>, will be celebrated around the world as Human Rights Day. I will join in celebrating because I believe in human rights, and I have seen many, many times their power to improve, even save, people's lives. But especially this year, I think we also need to reflect on what more we can do, and how we can do it better, because although we win some battles, I fear we could still lose the war.

Let me add that we are holding this briefing in recognition of Human Rights Day, December 10<sup>th</sup>, which is the moment when the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate is often honored in Oslo, Norway. This year's recipient is Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos for his continuing efforts to broker a peace accord in Colombia with the FARC guerrillas. As I noted earlier, this is happening within a landscape of violence and escalating attacks against human rights defenders.

As inspiration, I would like to recall for everyone that the Nobel Peace Prize began in 1901 and has been awarded 97 times to 130 Laureates, including 104 individuals and 26 organizations. The International Committee of the Red Cross has received it 3 times and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees has received it twice.

Several U.S. presidents and U.N. secretaries general have been awarded the prize. But most inspiring, I believe, are the many individuals and NGOs who have received this honor, too many to name, but I would like to highlight but a few: Amnesty International; Doctors Without Borders; the International Campaign to Ban Landmines; International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War; the Grameen Bank; American Friends Service Committee; Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.; Andrei Sakharov; Jane Adams; Mother Teresa; the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama; Elie Wiesel; Desmond Tutu; Nelson Mandela; Rigoberta Menchú; Adolfo Pérez Esquivel; Bishop Belo and Jose Ramos Horta; Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan; Aung Sun Suu Kyi; Liu Xiaobo; and Malala Yousafzi.

Hardly a complete listing, but truly, they light a path for us all in the struggle to achieve peace, courage and human rights and dignity for all.

So, I very much look forward to hearing our panelists' recommendations, and I hope this will be the first of many discussions going forward.

Thank you.