

JPM Opening Remarks

USIP Bipartisan Congressional Dialogue on *Human Rights: The Foundation for Peace* March 20, 2018

Opening remarks as prepared for delivery:

I join my colleague and Co-Chair Congressman Hultgren in thanking the U.S. Institute for Peace for the invitation to join you today.

And I want to congratulate the Institute for this bipartisan congressional dialogue initiative.

While Members of Congress clearly have policy differences, many of us look for constructive ways to move forward in spite of those. I think highlighting issues on which there is common ground can be an important contribution to making government work better for the American people.

Foreign policy is an arena in which there are many important bipartisan achievements. Some that come to mind:

- the 1991 Nunn-Lugar program for securing and dismantling weapons of mass destruction;
- the 2002 McGovern-Dole program to support education, child development and food security in low-income, food-deficit countries around the globe;
- and more recently, the 2016 Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, which authorizes financial sanctions and visa restrictions on foreign persons in response to human rights violations and acts of corruption.

These are just three examples; there are many more.

Some initiatives – like sanctions programs or support for international justice tribunals – are focused on punishing human rights violations.

Others are about reducing the risk of the sorts of situations that can lead to human rights abuses – like conventional and nuclear war.

But not only war.

When people hear “human rights” and “peacebuilding” in the same sentence, the first thing they likely think about is armed conflict – how to end it and how to address the human rights abuses that its victims have suffered.

Dealing with the consequences of the brutal tactics used in wars in places like El Salvador and Colombia is one of the main ways I’ve been involved in human rights issues during my years in Congress. And it’s very important to victims and as a contribution to peacebuilding.

But more and more I am convinced that we must also focus on human rights from a prevention perspective.

The situations of human rights abuses that are brought to our attention in the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission often do involve war – Syria and Yemen are clear examples.

But at least as often, we’re asked what Congress can do in response to situations of systematic discrimination and abuse carried out by a government against a subset of its own people.

Those people may be ethnic, cultural or religious minorities, like the Tibetans and Uyghurs in China; the Baha’i in Iran; Christians in Egypt; non-Arab peoples in Sudan; or the Rohingya in Burma.

Or they may be majorities ruled by minorities, like the Shi’a in Bahrain.

Or they may be political opponents, as in Russia or Turkey. Or civil society actors – such as journalists and bloggers in Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh or Mexico, or defense lawyers in China.

Or they may be gay, as in Russia and Egypt and many other places.

In these kinds of situations, human rights abuses are the product of a country’s internal political dynamics. That complicates the efforts of those of us in Congress or the U.S. government who look for ways to respond.

But what we know is that these situations are warning signs. When governments systematically discriminate against some of their people, sooner or later we are likely to see radicalization and increased conflict – even armed conflict that can spill over borders.

And when that happens, governments will double-down on repression, and in the post-9/11 era, they will cloak their crackdown in the discourse of anti-terrorism.

This is exactly what has happened in Burma.

In closing, let me say that I believe the bipartisan consensus on the importance of human rights as a pillar of U.S. foreign policy remains fairly solid.

But I also think we face renewed challenges from regimes that are authoritarian – whether de jure or de facto – and feel empowered in the current international environment. And I'm sad to say an environment that has been made more complicated by the lack of focus on human rights by our own current administration.

Some of those same regimes are facilitating and prolonging brutal wars with devastating humanitarian and geopolitical consequences.

We are struggling to find an effective, pro-human rights ways forward to respond to these regimes. That is our current task.

I am convinced that this requires more than military projection. We need clear-eyed engagement, robust diplomacy, multilateral strategies, long-term development aid and programming, and an across-the-board commitment to rule of law. We need to be thinking out of the box. And we need to lead by example.

It has become too convenient and too common to rationalize, or explain away, or ignore in some cases, human rights abuses around the world. Oftentimes we hear we have economic interests, or we have military or strategic interests, or we have no interests, as a way to justify our lack of action. I think those are just excuses.

Sometimes because of the magnitude of some of the human rights atrocities that we are witnessing, and the multitude of human rights challenges around the world, people get overwhelmed.

I'm reminded of the words of Archibald MacLeish who once said "We are deluged with facts, but we have lost or are losing our human ability to feel them." And I worry about that sometimes.

But what I do know is that while we're not perfect here in the United States, I think we have a moral obligation to champion the cause of human rights. And we need to do better. Especially in this very dangerous and complicated world, I think our leadership on human rights is more important than ever.

Thank you.