

State of Human Rights

Jimmy Carter
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Mrs. de Menil, honorees, distinguished guests:

When our master of ceremonies stands here and says to the audience, "My name is Bernard Shaw, and I work for CNN," or to any audience in the world, it's one of the most ridiculous introductions of oneself I've heard since the 1976 Democratic convention, when I had worked for a number of months, had gained a majority of the delegates, and stood there and said, "My name is Jimmy Carter, and I'm running for president." You can see that famous people like Bernard Shaw have literally transformed the understanding of people around the world. Rosalynn and I in recent weeks have been in 10 African countries, and in Kazakhstan, and in Moscow. Everywhere we go, the leaders of those nations have their opinions shaped and their priorities rearranged by the superb production of news in an unbiased way by CNN and Bernard Shaw, and I want to express my personal thanks to him for being willing to be our master of ceremonies today.

As is the case with the news media, the human rights organizations are now collectively taking another look at ourselves. Annually, since the Carter-Menil awards began, I've been making a report, somewhat in fumbling terms, because of the complexity of the subject, about the progress of the human rights movement in the world.

I think with the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev, with glasnost and perestroika and the end of the Cold War, there is now a sense of potential fulfillment that has not been realized. And this next year, The Carter Center and others will be working broadly to try to improve the effectiveness of the human rights effort. I'll be very brief in outlining three points that we hope to achieve.

One is to bring the human rights organizations into a closer teamwork with each other, each one admirable in its own realm of interest, but quite often not communicating, not sharing, even sometimes competing for headlines and for funding. I think the opportunity for us to come together and work as a team sharing and dividing responsibility and complementing one another is an untapped potential for the future.

Another one is that most of us, even the most notable ones, such as Amnesty International, Americas Watch, the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, and others, basically are what we claim to be—that is, watch committees. We watch and observe, and after a crime is committed, then we try to expose it and do something about it. A preemptive approach, an effort to prevent crimes bef

Security Council have not wanted the United Nations to have any capability of looking inside their borders to ascertain what has been going on there. With the end of the Soviet Union as a superpower and its fragmentation into different countries, and now a much more aggressive and positive U.N. secretary-general in place—Boutros Boutros-Ghali—we can honor in 1993 his declaration that that's a year of human rights and strengthen and give vigor to the United Nations as a major human rights entity. So we look to the future not with despair, not with hopelessness, but with some anticipation of improvement.

Since 1986, every year on the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Carter-Menil Awards have been made. We have tried, working with some of the major human rights leaders, to identify those who are most worthy of this recognition, from the Soviet Union,

I was not quite so successful in another effort, which has already been mentioned, concerning the religious rights of Indians. I approved a law that was passed in 1978. Let me just quote briefly from a comment that I made when the law was passed. This was the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. I said at that time, this legislation is designed, and I quote, "to protect and preserve the inherent right of American Indian

Guatemala or El Salvador, and deny that there are any death squads and praise the benevolence of these recipients of major grants of American taxpayers' money, then for someone to leave those countries and come to this country is a very, very difficult task indeed. I'm not going to dwell on specifics, but I just want to talk briefly about one family with which I happen to be familiar. It's still not safe for me to give this person's name. I'll call him Dr. Julio. Dr. Julio came from a prominent family in Guatemala. He got his medical degree. He decided that instead of ministering to his fellow fairly wealthy and affluent Guatemalans, he would cast his lot with the indigenous people, the Indians of that country.

It became known to the death squads of the military that Dr. Julio knew a lot about the Indians in the mountains. And they demanded that he turn over his medical records to them so that they could get the names of men whom he had treated. He refused to do so. They continued to harass him. One day, Dr. Julio was going from one village to another with his assistant, and his assistant had his wife and three daughters with him. Soldiers surrounded them, and they grabbed the assistant and said, "Dr. Julio, we're going to show you what will happen to you if you don't give us your medical records." He pled with the soldiers not to injure his assistant. They put a pistol to his head and blew his brains out with his wife and children watching.

The next morning, Dr. Julio was back in his office, and a neighbor came down the street screaming, "Dr. Julio, the soldiers have got your 2-year-old son." Dr. Julio ran out in the street and got some neighbors. They overtook the soldiers, and almost miraculously, they got the 2-year-old son back safely.

That evening, Dr. Julio and his family went into hiding, and after a long and very tortuous journey from Guatemala up to our country, crossing our own border with great difficulty, they arrived in northeast Georgia, and they visited with a group, where Rosalynn and I have been several times. This was Jubilee Partners in northeast Georgia. And Jubilee Partners took him in and protected him, but he couldn't stay here because the American authorities said that there is no repression in Guatemala; you don't qualify as a refugee. So, he was forced to go to Canada. There was a constant inter-relationship then between Jubilee Partners in northeast Georgia and the Canadian consul general in Atlanta. Canada had opened its doors to people like Dr. Julio.

This is a very serious case, but it doesn't illustrate the worst cases, because Dr. Julio was Latino, and he could speak Spanish. But the people who are persecuted much more, whom he was trying to treat or care for, were Indians who could not speak Spanish. And that timidity that comes from a lack of language knowledge is a very great impediment to someone to seek asylum in another

that the waves would not wash them overboard, or huddled in lockers, where their parents placed them to be protected.

When I was inaugurated president, there were 7 million refugees in the world. There are now 30 million. It is obvious that the United States cannot open its door to large numbers of people who come here for a better life, so we have narrowly defined what a refugee is. When I was president in 1978, we adopted the international definition of a refugee. A refugee is, quote, "someone who has a well-founded fear of persecution." And that phrase "well-founded" is what is presented to immigration officials to determine: Is that person really a refugee or is that person seeking a better economic existence?

It's a very stringent definition. The crucial element, however, is a hearing so that our immigration officials can ascertain in each case: Does this person have a well-founded fear of repression? No longer are Haitians permitted to have a hearing, and so, as far as I know, they're the only people in the world who are deprived of a hearing before our own immigration officials. They are automatically returned to their country.

Our government's policy has been that there is no repression among these returned Haitians. Human rights groups take a different attitude. This is an Amnesty International report issued just three months ago, and I quote:

Extra-judicial execution, severe ill treatment amounting to torture, and arbitrary and illegal arrests continue unabated.... People are forced to hand over money to prevent torture, to secure improved prison conditions, or simply to obtain release from prison. Lawlessness pervades. Human rights abuse is part of most Haitians' daily life.¹

Oppressive groups carry out a wide range of abuses with total impunity. The ordinary citizen is left no other protection than hiding or paying ransom money. The opportunity to seek asylum abroad has been thwarted by the action of the U.S. authorities, where most of the asylum seekers have tried to flee. Haitians still live in a permanent state of fear, while their oppressors are free to kill, torture, and terrorize with impunity, and continue to make money out of their repression. And a more recent Americas Watch report estimated that more than 1,000 Haitians have been documented as killed.

Well, let me close my comments by just giving a brief additional personal report from Haiti. I've been to Haiti seven times in an effort to bring about an honest election there. The people lined up shortly after Baby Doc Duvalier left, that next fall, to try to vote. And as they lined up, the Tontons Macoutes, supported by the military, entered a courtyard of a schoolhouse and opened fire with their weapons. Thirty-four people standing in line to vote were killed. So, after that, the Haitians were very reluctant to go back to the polls. We went there several times to try to encourage them to have an honest election, and we finally got the OAS and the United Nations to join in this effort. And, somewhat reluctantly, the Haitians agreed to try again. It was a beautiful election. It really was. The people registered to vote. The candidates qualified freely. The military held themselves in check, under the leadership of a general named Abraham, and on election day, the people turned out in great numbers, as has been pointed out earlier.

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About a month or so before the election, a surprising candidate emerged, Jean. Bertrand Aristide, a young Catholic priest, who was looked upon as having almost miraculous protection from God