

# Secretary Kerry on the Release of 2012 Human Rights Report

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SECRETARY KERRY: Good afternoon, everybody. Some people asked whether or not we might postpone this today because of all of what is going on. But we thought that on the contrary, that it's a part of human rights to make clear that people have the right to run in a marathon without violence, and people have a right to enjoy a holiday without terror, and that the rights of people are represented in many different ways.

So we proudly stand here today to release again our Human Rights Report, and I want to thank – I'm glad to be here with Assistant Secretary Zeya as we present this year's Human Rights Reports.

These reports send a very clear message that all governments have a responsibility to protect universal human rights and they help to blaze a path forward for places where those rights are either threatened or denied. I think this is one of the things that we can be the proudest of that we do here in the State Department and in our country, standing up for values and speaking out for people who often don't have any chance whatsoever to speak out for themselves.

This report reaffirms in my judgment America's commitment to advancing basic freedoms and dignity of all people, and our support for the brave men and women around the world who are working towards that goal, sometimes unbelievably courageously, in isolation, in the most deserted places, without the glare of the camera or the support of a lot of people. There are people of courage, amazing courage, around the world fighting for these rights. And we need to stand up for them and stand behind them.

So I thank my colleagues in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and in our embassies around the world, for many, many long days that go into these reports. This really is a year-long effort because the reports are taken seriously and we want them to be based on fact. And so there's a great deal of analysis that goes into them. There has to be. There should be for one country, let alone 199 countries that are represented in these reports.

During my time as a senator, I traveled around the world and I saw firsthand men and women who had lived their entire lives without the most basic rights, whether it was the right of the freedom to speak their minds or to worship freely or to elect their leaders or to choose the future that they wanted for themselves. I've also seen firsthand what can happen when we work together and encourage change for the better, that amazing spark that grows into a shining light – a spotlight, if you will, on hope and progress.

I've seen personally the tears running down the faces of those who've gotten to vote for the first time in their lives. I've seen the joy in young kids who have gone to school for the first time in their lives. I've seen the tears of joy voting in the Philippines, when a woman emerged from the voting booth casting the ballot for the first time in her 70 years of life.

Or I've seen the calm courage of an Aung San Suu Kyi, who I met in her home 15, 20 years ago, where she was imprisoned, where after decades of confinement not unlike Nelson Mandela, she has come out and been able to forgive and to start working alongside her former captors to try to build a stronger and freer Burma.

Or as we all saw, the Libyans who filled Freedom Square in Benghazi, first to bring down a dictator, and then again to let Libya's democratically-elected government know of their demands.

The rights that these men and women struggled for reflect values that we as Americans hold dear. They're key to our DNA; they're who we are as a country; they're the bedrock of our nation. But they aren't exclusively American values, and I want to stress that. They're not American rights. They're not Western values or Western rights. They belong to all people, and all governments have a responsibility to protect and promote these rights. That's why we call them universal rights.

And yet promoting human rights isn't a foreign policy – and it's not a foreign policy priority simply because it's the right thing to do. It's tied to our own security. It's tied to the possibilities of prosperity and of nations living by rule of law and of nations living in peace. Countries where strong human rights prevail are countries where people do better, economies thrive, rule of law is stronger, governments are more effective and more responsive, and they are countries that lead on the world stage and project stability across their regions. Strong respect for human rights isn't merely an indicator that a country is likely doing well. It actually unleashes a country's

potential, and it helps to advance growth and progress.

So I ask you just to think of a country like Burma for a minute. Because of steps towards democratic reform and stronger human rights protections, a country that had been isolated for years is now making progress. Has it reached where we want it to be? No. But it's on the road. It's moving. And more people are contributing to the economy and participating in the government, leading to faster growth and development. And by starting to embrace universal rights, the Burmese government has opened the doors to a stronger partnership with their neighborhood and with countries around the world.

Many challenges remain. Corruption has to be rooted out. Remaining political prisoners need to be freed. And the horrible mob violence of recent days is another distressing reminder of how long it takes to build what de Tocqueville called the habits of the heart. But if Burma's leaders stay focused on promoting and protecting the rights of all people in their country, Burma is likely to continue along a promising path of renewal.

For other countries in regions in transition, the way forward is much less clear. And again human rights is going to be key factor in shaping their destinies, like the countries of the Arab Awakening. This is a movement that started with the demand for greater rights, dignity, and opportunity. The Tunisian fruit vendor who lit himself on fire didn't do so based on an ideology or a religion. He did so because he wanted dignity and respect. He wanted the ability to be able to sell his wares without interference, and without corruption. The students in Tahrir Square who brought us the revolution in Egypt weren't driven by a religion or an ideology. They were driven by their aspirations to be able to have jobs, education, security, and a future. And that really is the difference. Where entrenched regimes have been swept out and new governments have been slow to guarantee those rights and protect the most vulnerable and build accountable, democratic institutions, we still see resistance in this part of the world.

In Syria, Assad is desperately clinging to power, responding to the cries for freedom with murder and mayhem, more bloodshed. The vision of so many who have fought and sacrificed across the region will never be realized if their human rights are denied or ignored.

There and elsewhere, governments continue to restrict civil society. They suppress dissent, and they stifle free expression. Religious minorities find

themselves in prison for violating blasphemy laws. Online activists are shut down for criticizing their governments, or shining light on corruption, or just trying to speak out and express their view about a different future. LGBT communities are marginalized or criminalized. Women and girls are being targeted through rape as a weapon of war, and being attacked for the simple act of going to school – going to school. These tactics are as intolerable as they are shortsighted. They hold countries back, they create instability, they divided societies, and they set off cycles of retribution.

So anywhere that human rights are under threat, the United States will proudly stand up, unabashedly, and continue to promote greater freedom, greater openness, and greater opportunity for all people. And that means speaking up when those rights are imperiled. It means providing support and training to those who are risking their lives every day so that their children can enjoy more freedom. It means engaging governments at the highest levels and pushing them to live up to their obligations to do right by their people. It means encouraging businesses to respect human rights wherever they operate.

For nearly four decades, these reports, the very report we're putting out today, has helped us to make progress forward on that vision. These reports are thorough, they're honest. And they need to be, because our policies are grounded in a clear-eyed assessment of governments as they are, not how they want to be or how they pretend to be.

With each installment of these reports, we try to dig deeper into the ways that human rights are threatened. This year, we've included more data on prison conditions, official corruption, labor rights, and the effect of traditional practices on women's rights. And we've expanded our coverage of LGBT and disability rights. We hope that these reports will help lawmakers here and abroad, scholars, help students, civil society groups, and anyone who shares our commitment to universal human rights.

But I want to be clear. While these reports support our engagement with governments, activists, and advocates, they're only a small fraction of what we do on this issue. They're just one tool to try to shed light and create accountability and, hopefully, move people in the right direction and move our policy forward. They support the efforts, every single day, of our diplomats and our development experts. And they show brave citizens around the world and those who would abuse them that America is watching.

Those are efforts that I'm committed to. And when I travel overseas, I make a point of meeting with civil society leaders, independent journalists, bloggers, and students, all of whom can offer a very different perspective on the state of human rights that my government – that government counterparts may present. And anywhere that I sit down with presidents, prime ministers, other leaders of countries, I want you to know this issue is always on our agenda, even when it means telling hard truths. Because part of the American spirit is the fierce belief in the dignity and potential of every single person, part of American leadership is speaking out for people who can't speak for themselves. It's also standing up for those who fight for their own rights – as I said, sometimes in the most desolate places, without support. It is our effort to stand up for the universal rights of all people.

So again, I thank you. I intend to turn things over now to Uzra Zeya, who will answer any questions and make a statement, and others who will answer your questions as we go forward. Thank you very much, everybody. I appreciate it.