

Human rights stagnate in 2008, say reports

By GARY FEUERBERG
Epoch Times Staff

WASHINGTON, D.C.—In the year 2008, proponents of democracy and human rights faced a sophisticated opponent intent on undermining the influence of free nations like the U.S., according to two recently released reports.

Human Rights Watch and Freedom House, independently, concluded in their respective 2009 world reports, that authoritarian regimes mounted an anti-human rights campaign to prevent reform. They also agreed that the Obama administration will need to make human rights the number one priority if the U.S. is to restore its position as a leader in this realm.

“These human rights opponents defend the prerogative of governments to do what they want to their people,” said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch (HRW), at a press conference at the National Press Club on Jan. 14. Roth was referring to countries like Algeria, Egypt, Pakistan, China, and Russia, with the tacit support of even “free” countries like South Africa and India.

Today, a country would not dare to openly speak against human rights, said Roth. The principles in the Declaration of Human Rights that was signed 60 years ago have become too ingrained in international diplomacy to openly oppose them.

“They hide behind the principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and Southern solidarity, but their real aim is to curb criticism of their own human rights abuses or those of their allies and friends,” said Roth.

In effect, these nation states, which Roth labeled as “the spoilers,” dominated intergovernmental discussions of human rights, and effectively prevented the United Nations from taking action against the “severe repression in Uzbekistan, Iran, ... the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” and from creating the multilateral agreements that could ease troubles in Burma, Darfur, Sri Lanka, and Zimbabwe.

Freedom House Director of Research and author of the Freedom House report, Arch Puddington, said the “color revolutions” in 2003-05 in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, where several post-communist societies ousted autocratic and/or corrupt officials, mostly

non-violently, set off the reaction against democracy and reform.

“Powerful regimes worldwide have reacted to ‘color revolutions’ with calculated and forceful measures designed to suppress democratic reformers, international assistance to those reformers and ultimately the very idea of democracy itself,” said Puddington.

Especially after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, “a number of governments took measures to repress domestic opposition, weaken independent media, and hinder democracy assistance efforts by NGOs based in the United States and elsewhere,” writes Puddington.

Freedom House’s report was released on Jan. 12, when Puddington spoke at a teleconference.

Freedom House and Human Rights Watch agree that the Bush administration dropped the ball on human rights, and allowed the authoritarian states to take the initiative on human rights—unfortunately, in a negative direction. The Obama administration will need to make human rights its first priority in its foreign and domestic policy in order to seize the initiative back, according to both HRW and Freedom House.

HRW maintained that the Bush administration largely withdrew from the defense of human rights after deciding to combat terrorism without regard for an “enemy combatant” being subjected to torture, extraordinary renditions (enforced disappearances) to foreign countries, and indefinite detentions for detainees at Guantanamo Bay without charges or trial.

Highlights of the reports

Russia continued to lose ground on Freedom House’s measurements. Last year, Dmitry Medvedev, Vladimir Putin’s successor as Russian president, “won an election in which opposition candidates were marginalized through laws and regulations that have effectively made Russia a one-party state...,” writes Puddington.

Increasingly repressive practices at home and in Chechnya made Russia more willing to undermine international intervention for human rights. Russia on the UN Security Council blocked critical resolutions on Burma and Zimbabwe, notes Roth. And Russia bullies other European governments to ignore their crimes in Chechnya.

Freedom House’s political rights



HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATE: Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch (HRW), speaks at the National Press Club, Jan. 14, in Washington, D.C. on the main themes of HRW’s “World Report 2009.”

GARY FEUERBERG/EPOCH TIMES

scores for Non-Baltic former Soviet Union countries have deteriorated in recent years to the point that the area ranks below any region, including the Middle East and North Africa. These countries include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Moldova. In Armenia, for example, over 100 people were incarcerated after voting in the presidential election and violence was used to disperse opposition protesters.

Generally speaking, the year’s most significant gains for democracy happened in South Asia, says Freedom House. Pakistan’s status improved from Not Free to Partly Free when military rule ended and free elections were held. The same upgrades in status occurred in two other Asian states: Bhutan and Maldives, which successfully held

elections. Bangladesh, Nepal, Malaysia, and Thailand also registered modest gains.

The successes of democracy in Asia—Taiwan, South Korea, and multi-ethnic-religious diverse, India and Indonesia—“[refute] the theory that democracy is not compatible with Asian culture,” in spite of being home to some of the world’s most brutal repressive regimes, namely, China, North Korea, Burma, Vietnam, and Laos.

Surprisingly, India, the world’s largest democracy, seems less interested in promoting democracy and human rights in other countries than in its own, says Roth. Of Sudan, North Korea, Cuba, and Belarus, India blocked or abstained or voted against resolutions or actions that would address their human rights conditions.

One reason for India’s lack of enthusiasm for human rights is the notion—a deeply ingrained view—that human rights is a Western concept and international protection of human rights is a continuation of colonialism, according to Roth.

Iraq, although still “not free,” was the only country in the Middle East to show improvement due to “reductions in violence, political terror, and government sponsored Shia militias,” according to Freedom House. Afghanistan declined in freedom status to “not free,” due to “rising insecurity” and increases in “corruption and inefficiency in government institutions.”

China was the big disappointment this past year when the leadership of the Communist Party failed to live up to its promises of more openness and respect for human

rights as host of the Olympic Games. The regime cracked down on bloggers and internet journalists, placed human rights lawyers under house arrest, jailed democracy advocates and persecuted protesters, according to Freedom House. Christians and Falun Gong adherents were also “subject to stepped-up controls,” says Puddington.

China’s nascent judicial system suffered some setbacks last year. A defense attorney’s right to meet with criminal suspects in detention did not apply to cases involving “state secrets,” says the HRW report. The Ministry of Justice “threatened to not renew the licenses of a dozen Beijing lawyers who had publicly offered to represent Tibetan protesters.”

Lawyers were also prevented from representing the victims of the “shoddy construction of schools that collapsed in the Sichuan earthquake” and the “dairy companies’ poisoning of baby formula,” says HRW.

Both reports noted China’s persecution of the Tibetans and the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The March 14 protests in Tibet led to scores of Tibetans killed and police and Communist Party authorities arresting or fining Tibetans “suspected of passing information abroad,” says the HRW report. Monks in Lhasa told foreign journalists of a “massive ‘patriotic education campaign’ launched by the [regime] in monasteries and places of worship,” says HRW.

In Xinjiang, the Chinese Communist authorities even prohibited Muslims from fasting during Ramadan. HRW reported that in February, China published regulations that prohibited 23 types of “illegal” religious activities, including praying in public or at wedding ceremonies.

Freedom House is an independent nongovernmental organization that supports the expansion of freedom in the world through advocating democracy, the rule of law prevails, and human rights. Founded in 1941, Freedom House is widely recognized as providing the definitive assessment of a country’s freedom status.

Human Rights Watch is an independent organization since 1978, dedicated to defending and protecting human rights. By focusing international attention where human rights are violated, HRW seeks to build intense pressure for action and raise the cost of human rights abuse.

Jailed blind human rights activist refused release for treatment

Epoch Times Staff

Chen Guangcheng, a blind human rights activist, was refused release from prison despite a deteriorating health condition on Jan. 16, according to the Taiwan-based Central News Agency. Yuan Weijing, Chen’s wife, said the prison’s neglect had led to her husband’s poor health.

Chen was arrested in 2006 after exposing cases of forced abortion in Shandong province; he was then sentenced to four years and three months imprisonment under the charges of “damaging property and organizing a riot.”

Last year, Yuan was only permitted to visit her husband once, although, according to prison regulations, she had the right to visit him once a month.

According to BBC’s Chinese branch, when Yuan visited her husband in prison last December she was appalled to see how Chen had become “thin and shrunken up with a sickly yellow face.” Yuan said that Chen had been suffering from chronic episodes of diarrhea and passing blood since last July. She then put in a request on his behalf for a medical examination.

Despite this, the prison only made routine medical examinations, claiming a lack of equipment. Yuan also made several appeals to have Chen released on parole due to his need for medical treatment, and because he had already served half his sentence. Officials told Yuan that the case was out of their hands.

The department gave no reply about a request for a complete medical examination until very recently.

Yuan explained that the prison gave her husband untreated water, though they knew he suffered severe cases of diarrhea. She said she was worried about his mental state, and complained that prison staff refused to let him listen to the radio, watch TV, or read books in Braille, and because of this he was virtually isolated from the outside world.

Yuan once appealed to Chinese



Chen Guangcheng’s picture being held by a pro-democracy activist during a protest in Hong Kong. MIKE CLARKE/AFGETTY IMAGES

Communist Party leader Hu Jintao, requesting the authorities stop harassing her and her family. Since the incidents began her house has been under surveillance by at least ten men, she says.

Chen’s wife and the human rights organization Chinese Human Rights Defender appealed to the Chinese authorities to provide further medical treatment for Chen.

Israelis and Arabs hand in hand for peace

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Her aim was to create a space where both sides can speak of the confusion, fear and frustration they experience during the war. Kna’an stood against the bombing of the South-Israeli town of Sderot, and before this war began, she went with other women to express their identification with the people of Sderot.

But such events don’t make the news, she said.

Eva Brenner, an artist, arrived from Austria days earlier. When friends told her about the demonstration, which was held last Saturday, she immediately decided to come along.

“The TV networks in Austria and Europe never broadcast the phenomena of Arabs and Jews who wish to peacefully co-exist side by side,” she said.

“They only broadcast the destruction and killing going on the Palestinian side. I believe peace can be made here, but they don’t show that in Europe.”

Neomi Geffen, a resident of the North-Israeli city Nahariya, isn’t usually politically active, and she never participates in demonstrations. But this time she did.

“I am angry with both sides for not stopping the bloodshed and for not thinking of creative ways to achieve peace,” she said.

Geffen believes that Israel should help the people in Gaza rebuild and condemn the bombing of innocent civilians.

“Arabs and Jews have a lot in common, but they prefer to stress the differences and to blame each other for starting first,” she said.

Living together despite of disagreements

Taki Jacob, an Arab from Kfar Kara Village and Offer Haramati, a Jew from the Israeli town Katzir, disagree about whether the war was necessary, but that didn’t stop them from holding hands and meeting.

Both their children go to the Jewish-Arab school named “Bridge over the Ravine.”

Jacob said that war is not the

solution, and history can testify for that. He thinks this current war is not justified. But he also thinks Hamas should account for firing against Israeli civilians for eight years.

He believes the current situation is a result of a leadership vacuum in Israel and in the Palestinian authority.

Haramati, meanwhile, is certain something had to be done to stop the missiles firing on the Israeli south, but he also admits that the scenes of killing in Gaza are not easy for him.

“We know very well how to live together. We should learn to live with one another,” said Jacob.

He said that the people in this area are sane, and will keep demonstrating how the two peoples can live side by side. He hopes that the right leaders will turn up and lead the children of both nations towards a peaceful future together.

The two principles of the Jewish-Arab school at Kfar Kara, Husain Abu-Bakar and Tal Kaufman, were also at the event. Abu-Bakar explains that the purpose of the school is to create a new community of living in coexistence and peace. “It is the time for round tables and an open dialog between Arab and Jews,” he said.

Kaufman said the children had a rough time at school. “On one hand they met their classmates, and on the other is the harsh reality at home and harsh sights on TV. We worked hard with the children and their parents in order to strengthen the message this school carries, and mainly to denounce any kind of violence.”

At school, activities are held with children and their parents to allow them to speak freely about their feelings concerning the war. Parents speak freely about their anger and frustration, and in the end everyone feels strengthened.

Parents admitted that even among family and friends they don’t feel as free as they have felt during those school meetings.

The silent demonstration ended with a minute of silence to mark the mutual grief among both nations.

Israeli citizens initiate a humanitarian shipment to Palestinians in Gaza

By OFIR KAMINKOVSKI
Epoch Times Staff

TEL AVIV—It’s been a few days since a ceasefire between Israel and Gaza stopped the war which has left the Gaza strip in ruins.

Many people lost their homes, and basic needs such as food, clothes and hygiene are needed more than ever. A group of Israelis joined to-

Many people lost their homes, and basic needs such as food, clothes and hygiene are needed more than ever

gether to arrange a humanitarian shipment to Gaza.

They publicized the upcoming shipment via e-mail and from person to person, and arranged pick-up stations all over Israel. Each person contributed what they could—clothes, food, mattresses and blankets. They have collected the goods during this week, and on Wednesday they sent it to Gaza.

The effort involves Palestinian and Israeli groups that join forces for this important mission. It’s about tens of thousands of people without a roof, flowing water, electricity, and proper hygiene,” said one of the people in charge of the effort.

The shipment will go to the Gaza strip border, and will be picked by UNRWA, which will then deliver it to the thousands who need it inside Gaza strip.