

Preface to the 2013 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

As we mark the 65th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights this year, the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* highlight the continued pursuit of “free and equal dignity in human rights” in every corner of the world. Based on factual reporting from our embassies and posts abroad, these Congressionally mandated reports chronicle human rights conditions in almost 200 countries and territories. The reports draw attention to the growing challenges facing individuals and organizations as governments around the world fall short of their obligation to uphold universal human rights.

I have seen firsthand how these reports are used by a wide range of actors – by Congress in its decision-making processes surrounding foreign security sector assistance and economic aid; by the Department of State and other U.S. government agencies in shaping American foreign policy; and by U.S. citizens, international nongovernmental organizations, foreign governments, human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, scholars, and others who are committed to advancing human dignity.

Governments that protect human rights and are accountable to their citizens are more secure, bolster international peace and security, and enjoy shared prosperity with stable democratic countries around the world. Countries that fail to uphold human rights can face economic deprivation and international isolation. Despite that simple truth, these reports show that too many governments continue to tighten their grasp on free expression, association, and assembly, using increasingly repressive laws, politically motivated prosecutions and even new technologies to deny citizens their universal human rights, in the public square, and in virtual space.

This is evident in our report on **Syria**, where the government has committed egregious human rights violations in an ongoing conflict that has claimed more than 100,000 lives, displaced millions, and created an opening for violent extremists that continues to endanger regional stability and our own national security.

As President Obama has said, “Strong nations recognize the value of active citizens. They support and empower their citizens rather than stand in their way, even when it is inconvenient – or perhaps especially when it is inconvenient – for government leaders.”

Unfortunately, these reports describe new and existing legislative restrictions, in countries such as **Russia**, that continue to curb civil society and political opposition and target marginalized populations, including religious and ethnic minorities, and the LGBT community. In countries such as **China**, a lack of judicial independence has fueled a state-directed crackdown on activists and suppression of political dissent and public advocacy. In **Ukraine**, the prior government increased pressure on civil society, journalists, and protesters calling for government accountability and a future with Europe, but as we all just saw, Ukrainians demonstrated once again the power of people to determine how they are governed.

The reports also cover setbacks to freedom of assembly around the world, from **Cuba** to **Egypt**, where governments used excessive force to quell peaceful protests and dissent.

Governments that commit human rights abuses and fail to hold perpetrators accountable are not only acting against their best interest, but against our own. In countries where human rights are denied, violent extremism and transnational crime take root, contributing to instability, insecurity, and economic deprivation.

In **South Sudan**, a new democracy struggles to turn the page on decades of armed conflict and human suffering. Conflict fueled by political competition and interethnic violence threatens to derail the country's fragile gains since independence. Gross human rights violations committed by the Sudan People's Liberation Army as well as by anti-government forces jeopardize regional security as well as the democratic future of the world's youngest country.

As Secretary of State, I meet with many brave individuals who risk their lives daily to advance human rights, in spite of the threat of violence and government attempts to silence their voice. These reports and the abuses they describe signal to the human rights defenders and activists under siege that the U.S. government recognizes their struggle and stands with civil society.

We at the Department of State will continue to press governments to uphold fundamental freedoms. We remain committed to advocating on behalf of civil society and speaking out for the protection of human rights for all individuals.

I hereby transmit the Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013* to the United States Congress.

John F. Kerry
Secretary of State