

Nuremberg International Human Rights Award

Award Ceremony
September 14, 2003 in Nuremberg Opera House

Words of Thanks by the Prizewinner Ibn Abdur Rehman

I do not have words to adequately express my gratitude to the great city of Nuremberg, especially to the Lord Mayor, Dr Hesselmann and his colleagues at its office of human rights and the jury of its highly valued International Award for Peace and Human Rights for honouring me with the 2003 Award. This award is in fact a recognition of the selfless struggle for human rights by a large number of people in Pakistan. I have had the privilege of working with many of them at the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and in India-Pakistan or South Asian forums for peace. And I stand here as one of them, no better than any other.

I am also overwhelmed by the generosity of the people of Nuremberg. The popular enthusiasm evident at this grand peace table is more than a measure of your hospitality; it speaks volumes for the investment you have made in the service of humankind. Nuremberg has had many claims as the center of historic developments but its present image as a champion of peace and human rights is undoubtedly the most enviable and most enduring. Each and every resident of this city should be proud of this marvelous accomplishment.

Many present here might have listened to stirring addresses full of wisdom and rich in commitment from my predecessors at this table. I will not try to compete with them. Coming as I do from a country which is mentioned more in dispatches on terrorism and conflict than in reports on enterprise for peace and where human rights are mentioned mostly in accounts of their denial to ordinary citizens I will only mention some of the concerns we in Pakistan have.

We the inheritors of the Indus Valley Civilisation are an ancient people, with a record of many achievements in distant past. Unfortunately, the management of our relatively young state does not figure on the credit chart. Throughout the 56 years since Pakistan came into being the people have been engaged in a struggle, highlighted by a mass upheaval every 10 years or so, to realize their aspirations for a democratic dispensation. This struggle is going on even today.

The ideal of democratic self-determination is of fundamental importance to our people because without it Pakistan cannot speak in a voice that is at the same time authentic and legitimate. The absence of genuinely democratic institutions undermines Pakistan's capacity to respect the call of peace and human rights both.

Allow me to say that neither the Pakistani people's need of democracy nor their commitment to it has been fully appreciated by the developed world, which has tended to endorse dictators for narrow considerations. One sometimes hears that in view of some deficiencies in their make-up or their lack of requisites of a democratic order, the people of Pakistan, and for that matter similarly placed societies, should expect no better than rule by military cabals and their self-serving surrogates. Such suggestions are not justified by the history of many communities' progress towards self-realisation. Besides, they reinforce the division of humankind into those who are qualified to enjoy democracy, peace and human rights and those who may fend themselves as best as they can off authoritarianism, bloody conflicts and abuse of basic rights. The very concept of universality of basic human entitlements is undermined. I should therefore stress the need for viewing the Pakistani people's striving for democracy as a matter of international concern.

In a country where authoritarianism has been the rule and short-lived democratic facades an exception, references to human rights appear somewhat unrealistic. In terms of human rights indicators our problems are legion. Women do not enjoy their basic rights, even



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those sanctioned by law, and violence against them is rampant. We have child labour, though this problem is now attracting more attention than before. There is discrimination against national and religious minorities. The basic rights of the working people are being curtailed. Civil and political rights are under strain and a large number of people suffer denial of liberty and torture every year. The factors contributing to this situation include, besides absence of democracy, gaps and deficiencies in the national charter of fundamental rights, decline in the judiciary's independence, non-adherence to international human rights instruments and indifference to treaties that have been ratified, religious orientation of the state, feudalism, and the state's tendency to ignore the civil society and its undisguised hostility towards political parties and NGOs. On the positive side, human rights standards can no longer be publicly disowned by the government, the people have learnt to articulate their grievances, and quite a few organizations are engaged in advocacy. Peace is on the agenda of many of them. They see little prospect of an early breakthrough but they are sustained by their faith and their optimism.

Many of you perhaps share the concern felt in several parts of the world about the nexus between international terrorism and the so-called fundamentalists in Pakistan. True, there are extremists and militants in our country, perhaps more than our due share of the world population of zealots, but they do not account for the entire society, nor even a majority. They pose a greater threat to their own society than the outside world. While the existence and doings of these cancerous elements are fully covered by the international media, the outside world gets to know little of the other strands that make up the Pakistan mainstream. There are parties and groups that view democracy as a secular ideal.

There are women organizations whose fight for basic human dignity and equity the successive regimes have failed to suppress. The lawyers have been battling for rule of law and independence of the judiciary. Trade unions are resisting encroachments on their traditionally recognized rights. Peasant groups are up in arms for their right to land. There are people, however small their number, that have denounced nuclear tests, refused to prefer guns to bread, and protested against terrorist attacks on the Indian people. These groups have the capacity to marginalize the fundamentalists who owe their visibility and share of public space to their interdependence with authoritarian regimes, civil as well as military. All they ask for is a global environment inspired by universal and fair-minded respect for human values of civilized existence.

For, the dynamics of Pakistan society, or in other developing countries, cannot remain uninfluenced by trends on the global scene. The vast population of the countries that emerged from colonial domination after the Second World War has not received a fair deal from the advanced nations. Much of the uneasiness in these countries is due to the dissipation of initiatives such as the Brandt Commission, the Stockholm Social Charter and the North-South dialogues. The have-nots of the world are obviously uncomfortable with a status quo that condemns them to growing impoverishment and denial of social progress. They are seriously scared of new international regimes that treat their concerns with indifference, if not contempt.

The gap between the world's under-privileged and the powerful rich has widened over the past couple of years not only in material terms but also in respect of perceptions of peace and justice. A great deal of the effort to create a world of peace and harmony made since the 1940s is threatened with reversal. If powerful countries can get away with their unilateral decisions on war and peace and bypass the United Nations, the incitement to less mature regimes to keep fighting among themselves is obvious. If the killing of innocent civilians can be justified as collateral damage, if prisoners of war can be denied their rights under the Geneva Conventions, if the right to rebel against injustice can be suppressed, then the whole world is being diverted away from the ideals of peace and human rights.

I have taken the liberty of making these submissions because the deprived sections of humankind expect forward-looking states, such as today's Germany, to defend the universality of the right to peace and human rights and pull their weight in addressing the causes that lead people in poor countries to suicidal despair. They have to ensure that the new socio-political-economic world order offers equity and justice to all peoples of various hues and dispositions. That is the only way to secure peace and human rights.



It is, however, illogical and unfair to put the entire responsibility for keeping the world on a sane course on advanced and rich countries. South Asia's problems, for instance, lie in the main in Pakistani and Indian pathological obsession with politics of hostility. These two neighbours have caused each other huge losses in wars and during long years of preparations for war. Their fondness for nuclear weapons has created a spectre of horrendous devastation. The pursuit of such mutually destructive policies has contributed to the rise of monsters of hate, caused deviations from democracy and fuelled communal strife. The cost is invariably paid by the poor and the vulnerable. Fortunately enlightened sections of civil society in both states are out in the field and braving the risks of struggling for peace and amity. Hope rests with them and they deserve a salute.

For that reason I thank Nuremberg for bringing me together with a distinguished Indian, my very dear and adorable friend Teesta Setalvad, who has faced hazards and challenges that fortune has spared me. I look upon this partnership as symbolic of the common destiny of the people of India and Pakistan, a destiny within their reach if they are released of bondage to forces that thrive on ignorance and prejudice and pave the way to power with decapitated bodies of the innocent. I hope neither Teesta Setalvad nor I will forget the responsibility this coming together places on us.

And I bow to your generosity and kindness. Thank you.