

2011 Nuremberg International Human Rights Award

Speech by Jan Jařab, Regional Representative for Europe of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights



Award Ceremony in Nuremberg, Germany, 25 September 2011

Your Excellency Prime Minister Seehofer,
Your Excellency Minister Leuchtheusser-Schnarrenberger,
Lord Mayor Maly,
Mr. Hollman Morris,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor as well as a great pleasure for me to represent here today the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navanethem Pillay, as her Regional Representative for Europe, at the occasion of 2011 Nuremberg International Human Rights Award, and I would like to thank the City of Nuremberg for inviting me.

Please let me express my deep admiration to the City of Nuremberg for the remarkable way in which, over the last 16 years, it has established what can rightly be called a new and honorable tradition of human rights engagement. I am well aware that this prestigious prize is only one of a number of activities of this City in the area of human rights. Indeed, I have been previously involved in one of these activities here in Nuremberg, and I was very much impressed by the enthusiasm, professionalism and authenticity which the City's Human Rights Office brings to this work.

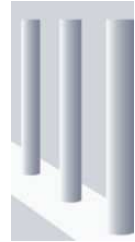
In today's globalized, multicultural and rapidly changing world, international human rights standards – starting with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and further developed in binding Covenants and Conventions – are needed because they represent a common, universalistic frame of reference.

We in the United Nations' Human Rights Office – together with our esteemed independent experts who are members of Treaty Bodies, and Special Rapporteurs – are firmly convinced that international human rights standards must remain universal and that States must remain the principal duty bearers responsible for respecting these standards. (However, they are not the only ones, because non-state actors such as armed insurgents also have their share of responsibility.)

Violations of internationally recognized human rights cannot be justified by references to the specificity of particular political systems, religions or cultures. Such claims are always sooner or later exposed as propagandist rhetoric of those in power, at the expense of those who have been silenced.

During the Cold War, just about a hundred kilometers away from here started a vast territory where there was no freedom of expression or assembly, no free elections, and the Governments claimed that their people were more satisfied than anywhere else. Even in free countries, some people thought and said that we East Europeans were culturally different

and had no desire for individual rights and freedoms. In 1989, this turned out to be plainly wrong.



Twenty-two years later, we are witnessing the meltdown of dictatorial regimes in North Africa and the Middle East – and we see their citizens actively claiming their civil and political rights as well as economic and social rights, showing the world that they were not happy when they were silenced. We should not underestimate the capacity of the oppressed to maintain their dignity, their desire to enjoy the same universal rights as everyone else.

This does not mean, of course, that political freedom itself is a guarantee of human rights. Those who win free elections have to respect the rights of those who were not on the winning side; otherwise, majority rule can still mean the oppression of minorities. Even democracies are imperfect, and some are very imperfect indeed. There are many whose voices are weak and easily ignored even within a society which is formally democratic:

- indigenous people and millions of rural and urban poor in Latin American, African and Asian countries;
- migrants and members of stigmatized groups such as the Roma here in Europe;
- persons of different sexual orientation in many parts of the world, including some European countries;
- persons with disabilities, particularly with intellectual and mental disabilities, almost everywhere;
- women who are victims of violence;
- and children, whose rights require special protection.

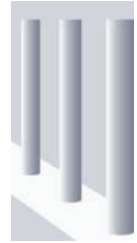
Even democratic countries need human rights defenders, including independent journalists, who speak up against the powerful security establishments if they violate human rights; or, in a European context, those who defend the rights of stigmatized groups of people against popular prejudice that is used and fed by populist politicians.

Just as we have to struggle against the wholesale denial of human rights by non-democratic regimes, we also cannot accept that democratically elected Governments violate human rights selectively, justifying such violations by alleged national interests, security needs, or requirements of the dominant culture. And we have to be particularly vigilant when Governments (or powerful non-state actors) turn against human rights defenders, including independent journalists: by identifying them as unpatriotic and as enemies of the state, by introducing censorship, or even by threats and intimidation. Every year, many human rights defenders, including independent journalists, lose their lives – in the post-Soviet territories, in Asia and Africa as well as in Latin America.

In this context, I am particularly happy that this year's Nuremberg International Human Rights Award goes to Colombian journalist Hollman Morris, and I wish to congratulate him on this award.

To quote the head of the OHCHR office in Colombia, Christian Salazar, Hollman Morris has long been one of the bravest independent journalists in his country, struggling against the horrific evil of extrajudicial killings, against violence committed by informal and paramilitary forces, against impunity enjoyed by members of the official security apparatus. These, indeed, are the issues on which the UN High Commissioner's office in Colombia has also

worked intensely over the past years, and it is an honor for me to say that our colleagues have often cooperated closely with Hollman Morris as well as intervened on his behalf.



In today's Colombia, our Office is noting with growing concern that there is once again a rising number of threats against journalists. According to the Freedom of Press Foundation (Fundacion para la Libertad de Prensa), a national organization called to represent the interests of journalists, 1 journalist was killed in 2011 and a total of 81 threats against 107 journalists were recorded, which represents a clear increase compared to 2010.

As we see the challenges that Hollman Morris and his countrymen continue to face today, I hope that this award might play an important role in subsequent development away from intimidation as an instrument of politics and towards greater respect for human rights in Colombia.

Mr. Hollman Morris, I wish you success and good luck in your tremendously difficult task.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for your attention.