

Remarks in Recognition of International Human Rights Day  
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Geneva, 2011

Good afternoon, and let me express my deep honor and pleasure at being here. I want to thank Director General Tokayev and other ministers and ambassadors. This weekend, we will celebrate Human Rights Day, the anniversary of one of the great accomplishments of the last century.

In 1947, delegates from six continents began drafting a declaration that would enshrine the fundamental rights and freedoms of people everywhere and after nearly two years, the president of the UN General Assembly called for a vote on the final text. Forty-eight nations voted in favor; eight abstained; none dissented. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted, proclaiming a simple, powerful idea: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. It does not matter what country we live in, who our leaders are or who we are: because we are human, we have rights which governments are bound to protect.

Since then, many nations have made progress in making human rights a reality, but much still remains to be done. Today, I want to talk about the work we have left to do to protect one group of people whose human rights are still denied in many parts of the world today.

I am talking about gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. I speak about this knowing that my own country's record on human rights for gay people is far from perfect: until 2003, it was still a crime in parts of our country.

Some people have suggested that gay rights and human rights are separate. However, they are one and the same, because members of these groups are entitled to the full measure of dignity and rights, because, like all people, they share a common humanity. Like being a woman, like being a racial, religious, tribal, or ethnic minority, being LGBT does not make you less human. And that is why gay rights are human rights, and human rights are gay rights.

It is violation of human rights when people are beaten or killed because of their sexual orientation, or because they do not conform to cultural norms about how men and women should behave.

It is a violation of human rights when governments declare it illegal to be gay, or allow those who harm gay people to go unpunished.

It is a violation of human rights when LGBT people are forced to flee their nations and seek asylum in other lands to save their lives.

And it is a violation of human rights when life-saving care is withheld from people because they are gay or public spaces are out of bounds to people because they are gay.

No matter what we look like, where we come from, or who we are, we are all equally entitled to our human rights and dignity.

The most challenging issue arises when people cite religious or cultural values as a reason to violate the human rights of LGBT citizens. This is not unlike the justification offered for violent practices towards women like female genital mutilation. Some people still defend those practices as part of a cultural tradition, but violence toward women isn't cultural: it's criminal.

There are some who believe that all gay people are pedophiles or that homosexuality is a disease that can be cured. These notions are simply not true. But they are unlikely to disappear if those people who promote or accept them are dismissed out of hand rather than invited to discuss their fears and concerns. To people everywhere, I say supporting human rights is your responsibility too. The lives of gay people are shaped not only by laws, but by the treatment they receive every day from their families and neighbors, and the actions you take can determine whether human rights flourish where you are.

To LGBT men and women worldwide, let me say this: Wherever you live and whatever the circumstances of your life, please know that you are not alone. People around the globe are working hard to support you and to bring an end to the injustices and dangers you face. That is certainly true for my country and you have an ally in the United States of America.

We know the road ahead will not be easy, but many of us have seen firsthand how quickly change can come. In our lifetimes, attitudes toward gay people in many places have been transformed and there is little doubt in my mind that support for LGBT human rights will continue to climb, because for many young people, this is simple: All people deserve to be treated with dignity and have their human rights respected, no matter who they are or whom they love.

As it has happened so many times before, opinion will converge once again with the immutable truth that all persons are created free and equal in dignity and rights. We are called once more to make real the words of the Universal Declaration. Let us answer that call.

Thank you very much.