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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

Breaking the Silence: Fighting for Human Rights

(1991: 37 minutes, edited [22 min. on Czechoslovakia edited out])
Transcribed by Darrell G. Moen

Jan Urban (Czechoslovakian journalist and human rights activist, Charter 77 signatory): I think it always starts inside the soul. You have to demand what is your natural rights. This is not a gift. It liberates people when they fight peacefully for what is their natural right.

Narrator: The fight for human rights in Czechoslavakia, waged by a small group of dissidents against the enormous power of the state, culminated in December of 1989 with a sweeping victory that captured the imagination of the world. Halfway around the world, in Guatamala, the story is different. After years of repression, human rights groups organize and begin to fight back.

Amilcar Mendez (Guatemalan human rights activist): We've been visiting villages, teaching the peasants what human rights are and how they came into being. The situation is extremely difficult. I feel that at any moment I could be executed.

Kamleshwar Das (Former Deputy Director of the U.N. Centre for Human Rights): Out of the war [World War II] came a total indignation against all the brutalities and incidents that had taken place, and that was behind the great trust which everybody felt should be proclaimed as a universal guide for all the peoples of the world.

Narrator: Drafting an international document protecting human rights was a goal set by the newly-formed United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The idea was to have an understanding all around the world about the worth and dignity of the human person. Reaching consensus on the form of the document was difficult.

Unidentified male voice: Nobody was certain what it would be like, whether it would have to be a legal instrument or a kind of proclamation.

Narrator: The mounting tensions of the Cold War found their way into the committee, where the East favored social and economic rights and the West, civil and political

rights. For over two years, the committee discussed and debated the issues. Finally, what would come to be known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was brought before the U.N. General Assembly. On December 10, 1948, the Declaration came to a vote and passed.

Hernan Santa Cruz (Delegate from Chile addressing the U.N. General Assembly): From now on, all people everywhere will know that their heritage of fundamental rights has a clearly defined meaning.

Unidentified Committee Co-chair: In favor of adoption, 48. Against adoption, none. Abstentions, eight. Millions of people, men, women, and children, all over the world, many miles from Paris and New York will turn for hope and guidance and inspiration to this document.

Unidentified male voice: What they managed to do was to find, in general words, aspirations that would fit for all peoples, perhaps for all times.

Elsa Stamatopoulou-Robbins (U.N. Centre for Human Rights:): For the first time, the international community elevated human rights to an international concern. In other words, it was no longer the preogative of state governments to do whatever they pleased to their own citizens. It became a real concern for the international community, a legitimate concern.

Narrator: The worsening Cold War made it difficult to put the Universal Declaration into practice. Over time, the U.N. did realize the intentions of the drafters of the Declaration, formalizing an International Bill of Human Rights by adding key covenants that gave the Declaration legally-binding force. But even that was not enough.

Michael Posner (Lawyers Committee for Human Rights): The Covenants are really documents telling states how to behave. There's no notion of the individual really having a separate voice. And what the non-governmental organizations (NGO's) have done, both nationally and internationally, is to give those individuals an active voice and an active role in enforcing those rights.

Larry Cox (Amnesty International): We were able to take this document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is one of the most remarkable documents in human history, and breathe some life into it, take it seriously. Simply by taking it seriously, by not giving in to cynicism, by not saying that this is obviously a meaningless document, on the contrary, by going to governments and saying, "It's not Amnesty International that's saying that these things are wrong, it's you, in this document, that's saying that these things are wrong," [it has a tremendous impact.]

Ken Roth (Americas Watch): There is no government that can say we are ignoring the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Now, as we see throughout the world, many governments continue to neglect those words in practice. But perhaps the greatest achievement of the drafters of the Universal Declaration is that they have been so successful in gaining acceptance of its words around the world, and that is a crucial first step toward gaining acceptance in practice.

[Section on Czechoslovakia edited out]

Narrator: In Guatemala, there is no victory at hand. In the late-1970s, the military launched a brutal counter-insurgency campaign. Tens of thousands of innocent people were victimized, most in the rural highlands.

Unidentified Guatemalan man: In 1982, when most of the Quiche region was being bombed, almost 10,000 people were killed in one week. In that bombardment my parents lost their lives.

Unidentified Guatemalan woman: The army came by surprise and set fire to the houses. The people couldn't flee in time. Women, weavings in hand, were shot and killed, with the children, the elderly, together.

Adriana Portillo Bartow (Guatemalan exile): I had four daughters. The oldest of them, who were nine and ten [years old], were kidnapped, disappeared by the security forces of the government. There are 40,000 "disappeared" in Guatemala. When your family has been disappeared, this is like dying everyday.

Rigoberta Menchu (Human Rights Activist, 1992 Nobel Peace Prize Recipient): Our people have struggled just to survive such horrible experiences. If the U.N. Universal Declaration could be carried out in practice, it would be a tremendous accomplishment. Though our people do not know about this Declaration, they do know about human rights, the very rights referred to in the Declaration.

Amilcar Mendez: They ask [first] for respect for their human dignity, not for schools and teachers though they need them, not for roads and bridges though they may need them, too. Nor for work, or food though they may be starving. Now, look at their priorities. They can't stand the [civil] patrols anymore.

Narrator: The civil patrols are peasant militias created by the Guatemalan military to help control the countryside in its war against the insurgents.

Victor Hugo Godoy (Guatemalan Congressman): The patrols were born here in the early 1980s and the people were forced to render this service for free like cannon fodder. It was done so that the soldiers and officers wouldn't die.

Anne Manuel (Americas Watch): The civil patrol is a brilliant counter-insurgency weapon that the Guatemalan army dreamed up [with the help of the CIA]. It serves many purposes at the same time. On the one hand, it helps the military keep tabs on what the male, adult population of the highlands is doing. Secondly, it's a network of informers for an occupying army.

General Benedicio Ortega: When people do not wish to participate in the "voluntary" civil patrols, they have every right not to. We simply inform them of the importance of defending themselves against the terrorists. The decision is theirs.

Unidentified villager man: The army came to threaten us to tell us we were bad people. They asked us, at gunpoint, if we would patrol or not. "He who wants to patrol is a good citizen, he who doesn't is a guerilla." Trembling with fear, we had to agree to patrol.

Unidentified village woman: The patrol leaders said my husband must patrol or they'd kill him and our whole family. Just like that, they said it.

Narrator: The abuses in the highlands continue despite Guatemala's latest attempt at democracy.

Victor Hugo Godoy (Guatemalan Congressman): If someone wants to patrol because he thinks democracy must be defended, that it's helped him, raised his income, stopped the exploitation, brought health, education, and all his rights, then he'll defend it willingly. The problem here is that "democracy" is just a term that used. It hasn't brought well-being to the rural areas. So people ask themselves, "Why should I defend this system which has given me nothing?"

Narrator: In response, peasants have come together to form CERJ, The Council of Ethnic Communities.

Amilcar Mendez (CERJ founder): Article 34 [of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights] refers to "free association." It says that no one, not even one person, can be forced to join groups, such as the civil patrol.

Narrator: Amilcar Mendez, schoolteacher and founder of CERJ, teaches them about the rights guaranteed them in the new constitution.

Amilcar Mendez: The idea that everyone is equal is inspired by Article 1 from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 4 of the Guatemalan Constitution says the same thing, that everyone is equal in dignity and rights. These are the most important articles. And don't forget what Chapter Two says. What does it say? Human rights!

Justina Tzoc (village woman): I got into this work because they were forcing my brother to patrol. He's sick and can't bear the cold at night. So we told ourselves that there had to be a way to get rid of the patrols. Before, I never knew what "human rights" were. But today, through my experience and reading, my mind has been awakened. I'd like toknow more about human rights in order to defend myself and others. No matter who I must confront, I need to know how to respond effectively, how to denounce human rights abuses.

General Benedicio Ortega: Some people who aren't educatied or who don't understand the democratic system have followed Mr. Amilcar Mendez. But by undermining the voluntary civil patrols, what he really does is support the terrorists.

Justina Tzoc: Here, I have never known a guerilla. I don't even know how one dresses. Here, it's the army and no one else [who terrorizes].

Amilcar Mendez: The peasants come to Santa Cruz. Often, they walk for two days to get here. Or they borrow money, or sell a chicken or a little of the corn that they have, to pay their bus fare.

Unidentified village man: So the army [officer] said, "Is everyone here patrolling." I said, "No, sir. I'm not patrolling anymore." "Why not?" he asked. "I now see that a person isn't obligated to volunteer for the civil patrol." "And who told you this? Wasn't it Professor Amilcar?" he asked. "No sir! My own needs advise me. What I see comes from me not earning a cent and patrolling 24 hours a day."

Juan Mendez (Americas Watch): Many governments who are intent on not letting their people exercise their rights will look first and foremost to those who are promoting human rights. Guatemala is the saddest example of all because the many efforts th create human rights organizations have been crushed many times in very bloody ways. Therefore, there are many victims among the Guatamalan list of victims that were victimized precisely because they stood up to defend the rights of others.

Maria Mendez: This life is like waiting for a firing squad. We don't know when they'll attack and destroy our family. The attacks on Amilcar affect all of us.

Narrator: CERJ and other groups hold a demonstration in Guatamala City to protest human rights abuses in the countryside.

Amilcar Mendez: [at a rally] Respect the Constitution of the Republic! Respect the rights of the peasants to organize! No more dirty warfare!

Narrator: One month later, at a coffee plantation in the highlands, four CERJ members are disappeared.

Unidentified village man: They forced their way in. Look how they left it. Look. My brother's bed, look how they left it. Look how it is there. Here are his shoes. Everything's been rifled through. And this is where I heard a tremendous noise. They were knocking things over. I heard my brother cry out, "Brother, help me!" There was nothing I could do.

Unidentified village woman: When I arrived, I told him to let go of my husband. "There comes that woman!" he said, "kill her, kill her!" And he took out his gun and pointed it at me.

Unidentified village man: My son was sound asleep. They took him without his pants, naked. They were well armed so I couldn't say anything. I knew they were from the military. I'm sure of it. Some people say they don't know who they were, but no sir, it was the military, no mistake.

Adriana Portillo Bartow (Guatemalan exile): [My two young daughters were disappeared]. The disappearance of a relative is, I think, the worst pain that a human being can take. It immobilizes you. If you think they are alive, you can't and don't want to continue participating in the struggle [against human rights abuses]. You just want to keep your relatives alive. If you think they are dead, the pain is so great that you also feel immobilized. At the same time, you fear for your own life. So this is one of the means that the Guatemalan government uses against the people to control us.

Unidentified village boy: The military men hit my mother when she hugged my father. She didn't want them to take him. They told her to let go of him. They were in uniform and armed.

Tracy Ulltveit-Moe (Amnesty International): In the case of these four peasants, we've given them as high a profile as we possibly can. We've placed the cases on a number of action networks around the United States. We've publicized them in our international bulletin. We've put them into special campaigns. We think that to some extent this made it necessary for the government to at least appear to respond on these cases, to meet with the families and assure them that an investigation was going to be carried out.

Amilcar Mendez: These government offices [in Guatemala] have shown their incompetency. They're just reception offices. We never get an answer. They never say, "Here is the conclusion to this investigation. We found a violation and this is what will be done." We never hear anything.

Narrator: While investigating other abuses in Guatemala, representatives from Americas Watch meet with the families of the four victims.

Ken Roth (Americas Watch): The most immediate goal is to save the lives of the people who have been disappeared, who have been kidnapped. The broader goal is to try to make sure that this doesn't repeat itself, to make clear to the military that they cannot get away with simply kidnapping peasants who happen to belong to a human rights organization. [To let them know] that there will be repercussions, that the international community is looking, and that these sorts of actions cannot take place in a vacuum, behind a closed door, as perhaps they have in the past.

Juan Mendez (Americas Watch): Cases like disappearances do not go away. You can't hope that you get rid of a disappeared person and the issue eventually dies. It doesn't die and, particularly, it doesn't die precisely because it is kept alive by the relatives of the disappeared. Those relatives find mechanisms by which they can bring their grievances, and they can feel empowered to seek the protection of international bodies.

Ingrid Kircher (Amnesty International): [speaking at the United Nations Assembly in Geneva, Switzerland] In an important meeting with CERJ representatives, the president of Guatemala promised a response to the four abductions, but so far, no news of the men's fate or whereabouts has emerged. Other members of CERJ have been detained, beaten, and interrogated about their activities. The group's founder, Amilcar Mendez and several others, have reportedly received repeated death threats as a result of their work with the group.

Ken Roth (Americas Watch): Many of the Guatemalan members of the economic elite have fought tooth and nail to prevent the most severe form of condemnation by the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva. Classifying Guatemala as one of the pariah governments, the worst abusers of human rights in the world, would have serious consequences for efforts to build the Guatemalan economy, to attract international investment, in essence, to modernize the economy that is very much in the interests of that elite. Despite the fact that Guatemala very much deserves to be classified among that group of pariah nations, it is not [due to U.S. government pressure not to do so].

Narrator: In Washington D.C., Amilcar Mendez updates human rights groups about the worsening situation in his country. Mendez also lobbies Congress to stop the flow of U.S. dollars into Guatemala.

Amilcar Mendez: [speaking to a State Department official] To the degree that the United States is militarily and economically supporting a country like Guatemala, the U.S. government is not free of responsibility for what's happening in my country. [speaking to human rights activists] The bloodbath hasn't ended in Guatemala. Peasants tell me, "Don't come back to the village. The army has ordered us to kill you, to cut off your head."

Holly Burkhalter (Americas Watch): Generally, Americans don't appreciate, don't understand what it means to be completely at the mercy of the people that, under normal circumstances, should be protecting you - the police and the army are the killers.

Narrator: The four kidnapped peasants have never been found. Nor have their kidnappers ever been brought to justice. Other CERJ members continue to be disappeared or killed. At the same time, 65 villages no longer take part in the civil patrols. And throughout Guatemala, CERJ and other groups keep fighting for human rights.

Rigoberta Menchu: We have a great responsibility to do what we can as a people to make sure the rights stated in the Universal Declaration are fulfilled. I think this document is the greatest support that we have. But only if the people are willing to fight, can the Declaration be put into practice.

Kamleshwar Das (Former Deputy Director of the U.N. Centre for Human Rights): Those original drafters perhaps today, some of them at least, would have been quite alarmed to think that they had not made enough advance, and others would have been very, very gratified that more had been achieved than they had ever dreamed.

Unidentified Guatemalan woman: My feelings are to go on fighting to advance the struggle so that this movement does not die, but rather that it become increasingly enriched.

Jan Urban (Czechoslovakian jornalist, Charter 77 signatory): The world is more and more full of those beautiful people who, whatever conditions they live in, care about the suffering people in all different parts of the world. It's not a charity. By helping others, you've helped yourself. This is the reason we cry out about the situation in Rumania as well as in South Africa or in Central America. It's a long ways from here. We'll probably never go there. But we know that the world has to be a decent place to live in and that by helping people everywhere, we help ourselves.