

The Carter-Menil Human Rights Prize

## The 1989 State of Human Rights Address

The Honorable Jimmy Carter

### Introduction

You can see in your program that the last speaker was Dedi Zucker, one of the founders of Peace Now and a member of the Israeli Knesset, responsible for the policies of Israel. You heard him grieve over the fact that 250,000 Palestinian children were murdered. His government has been attacked, his life has been threatened, and still he comes here to tell us that he believes, and I think his actions and words demonstrate that his word is significant to us.

It's been my duty and I believe that the United States has a responsibility to stand with the people of the world.

their own schools, they cannot own property without risking its confiscation through a multitude of legal ruses. Some of these families – Christian and Moslem – have cultivated the same hillsides since the time of Christ. Now they are often forbidden to replace a barren olive tree, to deepen a dried up well, or to market their fruit in competition with their dominant neighbors.

This oppression has instigated the violence of the *intifadah*, during which more than 600 Palestinians have been killed by Israelis, of whom 125 were children. This tragedy has been compounded by 138 deaths from the hands of other Palestinians against so-called collaborators. Damage to human souls has been reciprocal. The peace, reputation, and conscience of Israeli citizens like those who have just spoken have suffered terribly, while forty of them have lost their lives. Such are the ravages of war.

Our honorees today have exhibited a special kind of courage: not only risking their personal safety, but risking the condemnation of their own friends and neighbors and relatives in speaking out for compassion, justice, reconciliations, and peace. In an effective way, Al-Haq and B'Tselem have helped to dramatize a special kind of human rights crime: those caused by civil war.

It is often easier for us to detect and evaluate a local or individual problem than to envision tragedy on a grander scale. We become angry and active when we see a filthy garbage dump or a polluted stream. But we are less likely to be aroused by the wider devastation of acid rain, the warming of our atmosphere by the build-up of carbon dioxide, the depletion of ozone over the south polar region, or the decimation of tropical forests. The importation and sale of marijuana is condemned and punished as a serious crime, but we accept as legitimate the manufacture and sale of an infinitely more addictive and deadly drug: the nicotine in cigarettes, which cost the lives of 290,000 American citizens last year.

So it is with human rights. We become personally distressed and go to action when we learn that

to those of you who have traveled overseas in particular, to learn that we are soundly condemned by others who consider a job, health care, and adequate housing to be of equal importance. Of even greater concern is our reputation as a prime champion of armed violence, both on our own streets and through the use of military force in other nations.

Despite some commendable reverses in policy during recent months, the Reagan legacy survives. Most of us have quickly forgotten the bombing and shelling of mountain villages around Beirut by our American ships and airplanes, but the people of Lebanon still remember. We have poured billions of dollars into El Salvador, most of the support going to military leaders who openly condone and probably direct the notorious death squads. The world knows that it was some of these same Salvadoran army troops who recently murdered six priests, leaving behind their scooped out brains as a bizarre warning to religious workers of all denominations not to criticize the right-wing leaders. We look the other way and maintain the flow of arms.

More than 40,000 Nicaraguan citizens have been killed and the country's economy has been

Looking in either direction from Ethiopia, other conflicts rage on. Eastward, there is a civil war of almost indescribably complexity and devastation going on in Somalia. So far as I know, no effort whatsoever is being made there to find peace.

Westward lies the Sudan. Last year, as Christians in the South fought against the imposition of Shari'a law – Moslem law – by a predominantly Moslem government in Khartoum, more people perished in this country than in all other conflicts on earth: 260,000. Eighty-five percent of the fatalities were noncombatants. Two and one-half million others are now barely surviving as displaced persons, many of them Dinkas who huddle in temporary shacks hundreds of miles north of their homes.

foreign aid is for humanitarian relief, and the prospect for the United States having wealth to share with us is quite remote. What can you say to give us hope for the future?"

There was a total silence in the room, and I paused for an uncomfortable time while struggling for a suitable answer. Finally I replied.

"Mikhail Gorbachev's willingness to slash military budgets has offered the world a new opportunity. This year, one trillion dollars – a thousand billion dollars – will be expended on armament.. Of this, the two superpowers spend 60 percent, and our closest allies account for another 20 percent. The other purchases come from countries like yours, already poverty stricken and deep in debt. We simply urge you to continue buying your weapons from us. If we can cut this waste in half, then 500 billion in additional funds would be available annually for food, education, homes, health care, and the elevation of the human spirit. I pray that we will have the wisdom to do this."

In the meantime, the wars go on, the waste of human and financial resources continues. Among the world's leaders, there is mostly indifference. Where are the expressions of horror and condemnation? Why is there not a marshaling of the tremendous available influence to force reconciliation between warring parties? Why are the scattered outcries for world peace simply ignored or considered signs of weakness or idealistic political aberrations?

Our all-too-feeble efforts at The Carter Center have indicated that these questions are not impossible to answer. Although governments and international organizations cannot or will not attempt to resolve most civil wars, I have found that, in many cases, both sides have welcomed our offer to initiate peace talks. Mediation is a science in itself, but one that is increasingly understood. It is a mistake to underestimate the difficulties, but it is a greater mistake to ignore the unexplored possibilities.

It is not easy to face facts. Everyone knows that the Israelis and the Palestinian Liberation Organization – yes, the PLO! – must work together to resolve the conflict so that Israel's security can be preserved while the Palestinians finally enjoy self-determination and human rights. Everyone knows that political and economic pressures and the withholding of weapon deliveries to Third World combatants might force them to the negotiating table. We all know that powerful intermediaries, trusted by both sides, can help to make the negotiations successful. We can only