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Briefing on the Release of the 2011 Human Rights Reports

Special Briefing

Michael H. Posner

Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

Washington, DC

Remarks by Secretary Clinton on the Release of the 2011 Human Rights Report

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ASSISTANT SECRETARY POSNER: Thank you, Madam Secretary. I wanted to say a few words about the report – reports and what’s new this year. Then I’ll be happy to take your questions.

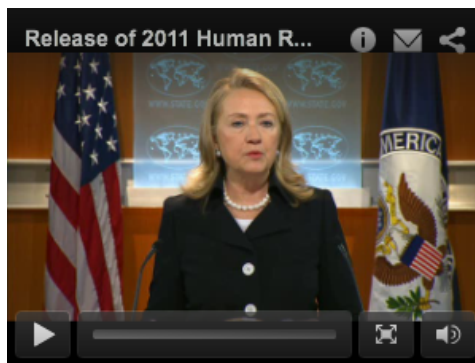
As the Secretary noted, 2011 was a year of dramatic changes with historic change led by citizens across the Middle East, North Africa, Burma and elsewhere. These reports document a number of situations where human rights continue to be violated, including in Iran, North Korea, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Eritrea, Sudan, and Syria. And there continue to be a range of human rights challenges in places like Russia, China, Pakistan, and other nations where the U.S. has important policy interests. In too many countries, egregious human rights violations continue, including torture, arbitrary detention, denial of due process of law, disappearance, and extrajudicial killings, all of which we document in detail.

These reports cover other disturbing trends in 2011. First, in a number of countries, we see flawed elections, restrictions on physical and internet freedom, media censorship, attempts to restrict the activities of civil society groups. Such restrictions stymie the efforts of citizens to change their own societies peacefully from within, which the Secretary has spoken so eloquently about.

We also report on continued, and in some cases, increasing persecution of many religious groups, including the Ahmadis, the Baha’i, Tibetan Buddhists, Jews, and Christians. The reports have a separate section documenting anti-Semitic acts. We document discrimination against other groups, including racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, women, and the LGBT community, which continue to face criminalization and violence in many countries.

But there are also a number of encouraging developments in 2011 starting with the Burmese leadership, which the Secretary has mentioned. Much more needs to be done, including releasing all remaining political prisoners, working to end violence against ethnic minorities, but we will continue to encourage that government to keep making progress on those issues in the coming year.

We also saw positive developments around the world in 2011 in Zambia, where they held free elections that were credible and orderly, in Tunisia, where they held free elections for a constituent assembly, a body that’s now rewriting the constitution. In Colombia, the government continues to strive to improve justice in human rights cases. Progress towards human rights is neither linear nor guaranteed, but we’re pleased to note these



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important landmarks.

Now, let me just say a couple of words about the report themselves. Since the 1970s, this is has grown into a mammoth undertaking. This year we have 199 reports covering every country and a number of territories. They reflect the work of literally hundreds of people here and around the world who collect information and edit, review, and fact check to make sure that these reports are accurate and objective.

I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to all the people who've worked so hard to make these reports the gold standard for human rights reporting and fidelity to the truth. I want to especially thank Stephen Eisenbraun, who's our commander in chief and chief editor, and he's done an outstanding job over the last six years in putting these reports together.

Last year, the report was viewed by more than a million people. As the Secretary noted, consistent with her leadership on 21st century statecraft, this year's we've taken a number of steps to make the reports more concise, more accessible to a broader spectrum of readers, and easier to search. This year's reports are more – shorter and more focused, and each country section now has an executive summary. We've used the latest technology to make the reports fully searchable as well as searchable across countries by topic. The public can share these reports on social media, and so they can have their own conversations about human rights. So I invite you to explore the reports online and to look at our website, a year old now, which is humanrights.gov.

Now, let me take any questions, please.

MS. NULAND: Let's start with Arshad.

QUESTION: Two things. One, could you assess for us the respect for human rights, particularly in those countries in the Middle East where authoritarian regimes were toppled last year? So specifically, I would include Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. Could you also comment broadly on your assessment of Bahrain's implementation of the BICI report?

And finally, I couldn't find it in the report, although I had little time to read through it, and I may have missed it, but I didn't see a reference to how the Libyan authorities handled the death of Colonel Qadhafi. And if I missed it, that's fine. But could you give us your assessment? I think at the time, Toria described it as an opportunity for the Libyan authorities to do a thorough investigation. How do you think the new Libyan authorities handled his death, any subsequent investigation, holding anyone accountable for what some people might regard as an extrajudicial killing?

MS. NULAND: You got three in there.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY POSNER: Yeah. Okay. Let me take the first question, which really is a broad overview of changes in the Arab Awakening, in particular with regard to Egypt Tunisia, and Libya. I think it's – first thing to say is that we recognize that change in any society that's been stuck is going to be a process. It's not a linear process. And so in each of those countries, we see both fundamental change in terms of leadership, but also a range of challenges that remain.

As the Secretary noted in Egypt, we now have today – yesterday and today presidential elections, which seem to be going – lots of people voting. The process seems open. But we remain to see what happens going forward. There's likely to be a next round and then a transition over the summer. There are a range of challenges that are still to be faced – writing a constitution, figuring out the relationship with the parliament. So we are – we're in a journey here, and I think our recognition is there's lots to be done, but we stand with the Egyptian Government and people as they move forward in that journey.

Tunisia, I think there is certainly a sense, as I said in my opening comment, that there's been a good deal of progress certainly in building the infrastructure, including the moving forward with a constitutional process that will set the framework for what needs to be done going forward. And Libya, huge agenda coming out of 42 years where essentially all institutions were destroyed, beginning to develop some stability, still a transitional government, hopefully in the coming months, an election, and the beginning of a process of regularizing the process of governing.

On the – your last question relating to the Qadhafi killing, the government, I think, has such a big agenda right now. I don't think it's reasonable to expect that they're going to be dealing with every aspect of that. They still have thousands of people in detention, many militias that still need to be brought into line. I actually plan to visit there shortly and will look into all of these issues.

And in Bahrain, finally, as we said several weeks ago, we have an important security relationship with Bahrain. It's in our national security interest to continue and maintain that relationship. But we've been very clear, very explicit – the Secretary was in her meeting with the crown prince – that there are a range of very serious human rights problems. There is an increased polarization in the society. We are eager for there to be a process that is a serious negotiation or dialogue that brings people together. But there are a range of issues on prisoners still in detention, accountability, police practices, so we continue to push it.

QUESTION: Did the Libyans ever really investigate Qadhafi's killing, to your knowledge?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY POSNER: I'm not going to – I'll answer that better, I think, when I go there and have some of those conversations.

MS. NULAND: Elise.

QUESTION: Just kind of more broadly on Bahrain and other countries, I mean, Amnesty International coincidentally came out with a report – its own annual human rights report – and said that while you have been a leader in human rights, it's kind of – you're not always that principled when it comes to economic and national security priorities. Sometimes that is taking a front seat, particularly on Bahrain. And also, on Syria, where you haven't exercised the sufficient pressure on Russia and China because of other issues in the relationship to go along with more robust action at the United Nations Security Council. Could you respond to that --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY POSNER: Sure.

QUESTION: -- and talk about – a little bit in general about the balance that you're trying to strike between economic and national security priorities and American values of human rights?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY POSNER: Sure. So in the broader sense, President Obama has talked about, and Secretary Clinton, principled engagement. We engage in the world and we recognize that there are a range of interests. We have security interests, as you say, economic interests, political, diplomatic. But human rights is an essential part of what we do across the board. And so it is always going to be part of the discussion. Secretary has been great, and I've been part of many discussions with her with strategic, economic allies where these issues are raised with a clear voice.

We raised them in Bahrain. To cite the two examples you've raised, we raised these issues in Bahrain recognizing that that society is at a turning point. It's at a critical juncture where there's actually been a greater polarization and more street violence. We're concerned about that. We're concerned about it because we know that it's in Bahrain's long-term interests and the interests of the Bahraini people that there be a coming together and a serious addressing of the human rights issues there as part of a broader path to reconciliation. We're not shy about that, and we raised it consistently.

And in Syria, I would say we have been as focused and as active as any government in trying to get more – a more unified international response with the Russians, with the Chinese, with others at the Security Council. And we have a multifaceted response. We pushed for the monitors to be in place – the Annan plan. That's clearly not enough and it's frustrating. We've pushed at the G-8 for there to be a plan for transition. We're part of the Friends of Syria trying to build up and strengthen the opposition. We've been absolutely clear for months that Assad must go. And we've pushed for sanctions and we've enacted sanctions and gotten others to do it. It is a very tough challenge, but it's not for lack of commitment or lack of clarity about what we're trying to accomplish or how we're going about it.

MS. NULAND: Michele Kelemen.

QUESTION: Thank you. I'd like to ask about China and the case of Chen Guangcheng. I wonder, first of all, how concerned are you about his network of friends who helped him escape? And then secondly, more broadly, I wonder, the way you resolve this case with the Chinese, whether you see that as a defining moment and new approach to dealing with these issues with China? Or are they so angry with you that they're never going to do this again and deal with you in that sort of way?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY POSNER: Well, let me say, first of all, about Chen Guangcheng's family and friends, we are closely monitoring what's happening with his immediate family – his brother, his nephew, the lawyers who have undertaken to represent his nephew, others who assisted him. We have and will, as I'm doing today, raise these cases and our concerns with the Chinese Government, both publicly and privately. We'll continue to

do that. We'll continue to have contact with Mr. Chen and get his input.

So there are – these are things, as there are many human rights issues in China that we're paying attention to. As we've said previously, in the last several years, there's been a closing of space for human rights lawyers and activists in China. Those are things of concern. We're concerned about other cases like Gao Zhisheng, Liu Xiaobo. Those are cases we'll continue to raise.

In terms of the relationship, we had, obviously, a dramatic few days – you were there – during the Strategic and Economic Dialogue. What was striking to me is that we had a very successful meeting while a human rights issue was being played out. I think the relationship is now so important to both countries that we have found a way, and we will find a way, to talk about our economic, political, strategic interests. And human rights is going to be very much a part of those discussions.

QUESTION: Can I --

MS. NULAND: Here, please.

QUESTION: -- follow up on China?

MS. NULAND: Here, please.

QUESTION: My name is Tara McKelvey and I write for *Newsweek* and *The Daily Beast*, and I have a question about Egypt. You talk about the elections as being open, and I'm wondering if you're concerned about the fact that there are going to be fewer monitors or it'll be harder to monitor those elections?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY POSNER: Well, let me say first of all that the election process is ongoing, and so at this stage we wait and watch, as Egyptians are doing, to see the final outcome, how the votes are counted, what happens in what is likely to be a second round, and what happens in what we hope will be a successful transition to a new civilian government in July.

We also recognize that this is an evolutionary process. There are some witnesses or observers there; not everywhere. But it is – from the initial accounts, lots of people are voting. The process seems to be moving forward. But there's a big agenda beyond the elections, and as Secretary Clinton has said often, a sustainable democracy requires a vibrant civil society, a free press, strong legal institutions, et cetera. So we have – there's a lot to be done, and this is going to be led by Egyptians. This is what the Egyptian people want. They want a stake in their own future, they want economic opportunity, and they want a stake in the political future of their country.

MS. NULAND: Here, please.

QUESTION: Is anything else more about Colombia in this report – positive aspects or negative aspects, for example?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY POSNER: Well, the Santos government has undertaken a number of things that we regard as being in the right direction in terms of addressing some of the longstanding human rights cases. As you know, Colombia has faced decades of political violence. Trying to make the transition in a way that both addresses accountability issues in a reasonable way and also moves forward in reconciliation is a challenge. But I think the attorney general's office there and others have been very mindful of the need to strengthen the judicial system, to move forward in a way affirmatively to build institutions that will protect all Colombian people. And we are with them in trying to address those issues in an important strategic dialogue we have with them and in other ways that we can be helpful.

MS. NULAND: We'll take Indira and then two more.

QUESTION: Thanks. I wanted to ask you to highlight in Iran what you feel is different in 2011 versus previous years, and particularly compared with the Green Movement's start in 2009.

And I'd also like to ask you about Eritrea. Am I right in reading this as if Eritrea is really the bottom of the barrel here? Are they the 199th on this list who you've been reviewing?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY POSNER: Well, first --

QUESTION: Well, who is if they're not?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY POSNER: First of all in Iran, sadly, 2011 was a continuation of many negative trends: intolerance of dissent, particularly a crackdown on demonstrators in February; free speech restricted; internet freedom restricted; political participation severely circumscribed; unfair trials, amputations, floggings; lots of death penalty, including some this year, many held in secret. So it's a very grim picture. And I want to in particular single out the case of the seven Baha'i leaders who were sentenced to 20 years in prison. The sentence was reinstated last year. They're now – in May, they marked four years of a 20-year sentence for basically practicing their religion. It is a human rights situation that is very disturbing, and we'll continue to call it out.

Eritrea likewise is a situation where there are a range of very serious problems. It's a government that restricts any kind of dissent or openness. I wouldn't – we don't rank countries. Unfortunately, there are a number of countries that have consistent gross human rights violations. They would certainly be on that list.

MS. NULAND: Catherine.

QUESTION: I'm wondering about Afghanistan. The report calls the situation of women, quote, "marginally improved," but it also calls the gains tenuous. I'm wondering, looking forward, are you concerned about 2014 and what happens when we transition?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY POSNER: We are concerned, and Afghan women and women's leaders are also greatly concerned. Women are critical actors in the reconciliation and reintegration process. They need to be not marginal to the political process. They need to be fully engaged and their rights fully respected. And we are very mindful, and having spent a lot of time with women's leaders there, I can tell you that there is a big – a tall agenda in terms of integrating women into the political process and making sure that women and girls' rights are protected going forward. We are very mindful of the challenge.

At the same time, there is a vital and vibrant civil society there. They're more engaged. And so I think it's in our interest to figure out how we can help them advance the agenda, amplify their voices, so that they can be more effective in the coming years.

MS. NULAND: Last one for Goyal. He's been patient.

QUESTION: Thank you, ma'am. If I may go back to China, sir, this report, of course, we stand here and sit here every year. There are millions of people in China who are seeking freedom and democracy, especially those who are being persecuted in the name of religion; they cannot practice any kind of religion there. And also monks and Buddhist and finally, as far as Tibetans are concerned, they are still crying. And when Secretary said that you are not alone, we are with you, they are still asking the United States that – when will you be with us?

And finally, as far as Pakistan is concerned, journalists and extrajudicial killings and women and girls are under attack in Pakistan.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY POSNER: On China, I would say this: There are a – there's a long agenda, a big agenda on human rights. We deal with it in different ways. Last month, Harold Koh, the legal advisor here, and I participated in a legal experts discussion where we discussed a range of issues, including the independence of the courts, independence of lawyers, detention issues, and the like. We were part of – I was part of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, and this summer we will have a human rights dialogue where we raise these issues.

So these issues come up in many different contexts with me and with other U.S. Government officials. We're very mindful of the situation of religious minorities – the Tibetans. We're very concerned about the self-immolations. We're concerned about the situation of the Uighurs in Xinjiang and elsewhere.

We are going to raise these issues as well as the individual cases, some of which I have mentioned. We're going to continue to raise our concerns about labor issues and about a range of other things that matter to Chinese people. These are issues that they are now increasingly debating within their own society. Again, we're going to amplify their voices and we're going to try to be reinforcing of that.

On Pakistan, I would say you've mentioned the extrajudicial killings, which is certainly one of the things the report singles out. We're very concerned about the violence in Baluchistan. We're concerned about the effects of those who've challenged some of the laws like the blasphemy law. Asia Bibi's case continues to be a cause of great concern. We have a big agenda. It's a tough discussion, but we're going to keep having it.

QUESTION: Could I just have one on that --

MS. NULAND: I think we have to let Assistant Secretary Posner go. If you have additional questions, we're going to take them and we'll answer them for you -

QUESTION: Just one on Mexico?

QUESTION: Please.

MS. NULAND: One on Mexico, and then we'll let you go.

QUESTION: In the opening, her introduction, the Secretary says that U.S. Government is watching and holding accountable governments who don't perform in human rights lists. In your report on Mexico, you said that security forces, especially the army and the Mexican navy, are not fulfilling their performance of human rights. And the Merida Initiative funds 50 percent. It's conditioned to the performance of human rights of the Mexican military forces. I just wonder if what you said in your report is going to be applied on the policy on the Merida Initiative, because the Mexican society is complaining a lot on the Calderon administration. So far are being more than 50,000 people dead in five and a half years. So what is your response to this situation, especially on the Merida Initiative?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY POSNER: Well - yeah, just two points on that: One, as you say, Mexico is a country where there's been endemic violence, much of it related to the drug trade and the government's efforts to curtail that. An aspect - obviously, that government has the, not only the right, but the obligation to try to protect its own citizens. There are a number of reports - and we document them in this report - of abuses by or violations by the Mexican military. We've had discussions. I've been down there several times meeting with Mexican Government, including Mexican military leaders, about how to improve accountability for those violations.

The longer term effort has to be to build a police structure and a criminal justice structure that deals with these cases outside of the military. President Calderon understands that and so does everybody else. But we are very attentive to these issues. We're both working closely with the Mexican Government, but also consulting broadly with Mexican human rights activists and others who are - who share our concerns.

MS. NULAND: And also just to remind you that Assistant Secretary Posner is going to be available at the Foreign Press Center at 12:15 if you're not in the American media and you have - still have questions. Thank you very much.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY POSNER: Thank you.

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