

HUMAN RIGHTS UNDER ASSAULT – WHAT IS TO BE DONE ?
A TALE OF THREE MEETINGS

Press Briefing by Irwin Cotler, M.P.,
on the occasion of the UN Council of Human Rights meeting in Geneva

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I recently attended the *Prague Conference on Democracy and Security*, which brought together dissidents from all over the world – an unprecedented and historic gathering – the “Davos” of dissidents; I attended the conference both in my capacity as a Member of Parliament and as the lawyer for such dissidents as Professor Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the leading democracy advocate in the Arab world, and former Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky. The conference issued the *Prague Charter*, which has become the manifesto for the dissident movements themselves, and which I signed along with the other dissidents.

I then proceeded to the *OSCE Follow-up Conference on Combating Discrimination, Intolerance, Antisemitism, and Islamophobia*, where I headed the Canadian Parliamentary delegation; and participated in today’s UN Human Rights Council meeting, which considered the report on the UN Council’s investigative to Beit Hanoun in Gaza, and where I disclosed for the first time why I had declined the invitation to join the mission as headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

May I make some brief comments in respect of each of the meetings, as well as the unifying theme underlining all three.

First, as I listened to the dissidents at the Prague Conference – coming from such disparate countries as Belarus, China, Iran, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria, and Vietnam – and as they listened to each other and their respective struggles – what emerged was the unity of their common struggle – of the struggle for democracy against dictatorship; the struggle for a “free” society as against a “fear” society; and the struggle for Human Rights as against the violators of Human Rights.

What emerged from their combined voice – and they stressed this theme – was that the promotion of democracy and human rights in each of these countries of oppression was bound up with the struggle for international peace and security; that those who would repress the human rights of their own citizens will threaten the rights of the citizens of other countries; that we, in the free democracies, must assure that the dissidents are not alone in their struggle; that the tyrannies will not be able to act with impunity; that we, political leaders in the democracies, will use our moral, diplomatic, political, and economic leverage, to give voice to the voiceless as we empower the powerless – while holding the state-sanctioned violators of human rights accountable.

The “Prague Charter” calls on governments and individuals in the free world to help those living in “societies ruled by fear and repression.”

The action plan includes: demands for the release of non-violent political prisoners; meetings by diplomats from free countries with political prisoners and dissidents; raising public awareness of the issue; raising human rights in meetings with officials of non-democratic regimes; applying the principles of the Helsinki Accords to link bilateral and international relations to human rights; isolating and ostracizing governments and groups that suppress peaceful domestic opponents; providing incentives to those willing to improve human rights and democratize; and isolating and ostracizing governments and groups that threaten other countries and peoples with genocide or annihilation.

Which brings me to the OSCE conference in Bucharest, where I said that the enduring lessons of the Holocaust and of the genocides in the Balkans and Rwanda are that the genocides occurred not only because of the machinery of death, but because of the state-sanctioned incitement to hatred and genocide.

Indeed, we are witness – as we meet – to a state-sanctioned incitement to genocide in Ahmadinejad’s Iran:

- the toxic convergence of the advocacy of the most horrific of crimes – genocide – embedded in the most virulent of hatreds – antisemitism
- propelled by the publicly avowed intent to acquire nuclear weapons for that purpose
- denying the Nazi holocaust as it incites to a new one

Nor should it be ignored that Iran is engaged in consistent and gross violations of the rights of its own citizens – the prosecution and persecution of women, journalist, academic, intellectuals, religious minorities, and the like. The Bucharest conference thus validated the truth of the Prague conference – that those who violate the rights of their own citizens with impunity also threaten international peace and security with impunity.

Finally, today at the UN Human Rights Council meeting, we had the spectacle of a Council indulging the voices of tyranny – the representatives of the “fear” societies of Iran, Sudan, and the like – while the voices of the dissidents from these societies are nowhere to be heard.

Moreover: the spectacle of the Council singling out a particular state – and a democracy – namely, Israel, for differential and discriminatory treatment, while giving the human rights violators exculpatory immunity; the examples include:

- the one-sided investigative mandate into Beit Hanoun – in its denial to Israel of a fair hearing, its denial of the presumption of innocence, and its prior determination of Israeli criminal responsibility
- the nine resolutions of condemnation of Israel, and no resolutions of condemnation of any of the other 191 members of the international community; with no resolution of condemnation, among others, of the genocide in Darfur, nor of the public and direct incitement to genocide in Ahmadinejad’s Iran
- the denial to one member state only – Israel – of membership in any UN regional association – thereby, not only denying a member-state the fundamental right of due process, but undermining:

- the United Nations, under whose protective cover all this takes place
- the authority of international law, under whose imprimatur all of this is enacted
- the cause of Human Rights, under whose banner this march of folly proceeds.
- The prospective institutionalization of the condemnation of Israel as a standing item on the agenda — the permanent indictment of a member state for differential and discriminatory treatment

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it and as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims, Human Rights are *universal*; the Human Rights of *all* must be respected. *That* should be the commitment of the UN Human Rights Council. Regrettably, that commitment is being violated in every particular.