

“Who are the terrorists? The people below who were bombed or the bombers?”

Text of keynote address to Suhakam’s Human Rights Conference.

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Global Research, September 22, 2005
Suhakam 22 September 2005

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

I would like to thank Suhakam for this honour to address you on a subject that you have more knowledge and experience than I do.

You are concerned with human rights or hak asasi manusia. And it is only right that as a civilised society and nation we should all be concerned with human rights in our country and in fact in the world.

But human rights should be upheld because they can contribute to a better quality of life. To kill 100,000 people because you suspect that the human rights of a few have been denied seem to be a contradiction. Yet the fanaticism of the champions of human rights have led to more people being deprived of their rights and many their lives than the number saved. It seems to me that we have lost our sense of proportion.

With civilisational advances it is only right that the human community try to distinguish itself more and more from those of the other creatures created by God which are unable to think, to reason and to overcome the influence of base desires and feelings. Submission to the strong and the powerful was right in the animal world and in primitive human societies. But the more advance the society the greater should be the capacity to think, to recognise and evaluate between right and wrong and to choose between these based on higher reasoning power and not just base feelings and desires.

The world today is, in the sense of the ability to make right choices, still very primitive. For example those who claim to be the most civilised still believe that the misfortune which befall them as a result of the actions by their enemies are wrong but the misfortune that they inflict on their enemies are right. This is seen from the concern and anger over the death of 1,700 US soldiers in Iraq but the death of a hundred times more of Iraqis as a result of the military invasion and occupation of Iraq and the civil war precipitated by the imposition of democratic elections are not even mentioned.

There is no tally of Iraqi deaths but every single death of a US soldier is reported to the world. These are soldiers who must expect to be killed. But the Iraqis who die because of US action or the civil war in Iraq that the US has precipitated are innocent civilians who under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein would be alive.

You and I read reports of the death of Iraqis with equanimity as if it is right and just. You and I do not react with anger and horror over this injustice, this abuse of the rights of the Iraqis to live, to be free from terror including state initiated terror.

Prior to the invasion of Iraq on false pretences, 500,000 infants died because sanctions deprived them of medicine and food/ Asked by the press, Madelene Albright, then US secretary of state, whether she thought the price was not too high for stopping Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, she said it was difficult but the price (death of 500,000 children) was worth it.

At the time this was happening where were the people who are concerned with human rights? Did they expose the abuses of Britain and America? Did they protest against their own governments? No. It is because they, the enemy, are killed. That is acceptable. But their own people must not be killed. To kill them is to commit acts of terror.

Yet what is an act of terror. Isn't it any act that terrifies people? Are not the people terrified at the idea of being bombed and killed? Those who are to be killed by exploding bombs know they would have their bodies torn from their heads and limbs. Some will die instantly no doubt. But many would not. They would feel their limbs being torn from their bodies, their guts spilled on the ground through their torn abdomens. They would wait in terrible pain for help that may not come. And they would again experience the terror, expecting the next bomb or rocket. And those who survive would know the terror of what would, what could happen to them personally when the bombers come again, tomorrow, the day after, the week or month after.

They would know that they could be next to have their heads torn off from their bodies, their limbs too. They would know that they would die violently or they would survive in horrible pain, minus arms, minus legs, maimed forever. And yet the bombings would go on. In Iraq for 10 years between the Gulf War and the Iraq invasion, the people lived in terrible fear. They were terrorised. Have they any rights? Did the people of the world care?

The British and American bomber pilots came, unopposed, safe and cosy in their state-of-the-art aircrafts, pressing buttons to drop bombs, to kill and maim real people who were their targets, just targets. And these murderers, for that is what they are, would go back to celebrate 'Mission accomplished'.

Who are the terrorists? The people below who were bombed or the bombers? Whose rights have been snatched away?

I relate this because there are not just double standards where human rights are concerned, there are multiple standards. Rightly we should be concerned whether prisoners and detained foreign workers in this country are treated well or not. We should be concerned whether everyone can exercise his right to vote or not, whether the food given to detainees are wholesome or not, indeed whether detention without trial is a violation of human rights or not.

But the people whose hands are soaked in the blood of the innocents, the blood of the Iraqis, the Afghans, the Panamanians, the Nicaraguans, the Chileans, the Ecuadorians; the people who assassinated the presidents of Panama, Chile, Ecuador; the people who ignored international law and mounted military attacks, invading and killing hundreds of Panamanian in order to arrest Noriega and to try him not under Panamanian laws but under their own country's law, have these people a right to question human rights in our country, to make a list and grade the human rights record of the countries of the world yearly, these people with blood-soaked hands.

They have not questioned the blatant abuses of human rights in countries that are friendly to them. In fact they provide the means for these countries to indulge in human rights abuses.

Israel is provided with weapons, helicopter gunships, bullets coated with depleted uranium to wage war against people whose only way to retaliate is by committing suicide bombing. The Israeli soldiers were well-protected with body armour, operated from armoured tanks and armoured bulldozers, to rocket and bomb the Palestinian and demolish their houses while the occupants were still inside.

Israel has nuclear weapons but it was provided with bombers to bomb so-called nuclear research facilities in other countries. And as with American and British actions, the Israeli bombs and rockets tore up the living Palestinians, Iraqis and soon Syrians and Iranians, without the slightest consideration that the people they killed have rights, have human rights to their lives, to security and peace.

Then there are other friends of these terrorist nations who abuse the rights of their own people, deny them even the simplest democratic rights, jailing and executing their people without fair trial but are not criticised or condemned.

But when countries are not friendly with these great powers, their governments claim they have a right to expend money to subvert the government, to support the NGOs to overthrow the government, to ensure only candidates willing to submit to them win. Already we are seeing elections in which candidates wanting to stay independent being rejected while only those ready to submit to these powers being allowed to contest and to win.

There was a time when nations pledged not to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. As a result many authoritarian regimes emerged which committed terrible atrocities. Cambodia and Pol Pot is a case in mind. Because of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of countries, two million Cambodians died horrible deaths.

There is a case for interference. But who determines when there is a case? Is this right to be given to a particular superpower? If so, can we be assured the superpower would act in the best interest of the country concerned, in order to uphold human rights.

Saddam Hussein was tried by the media and found guilty of oppressing his people. But that was not the excuse for invading Iraq. The excuse was that Iraq threatened the world with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Specifically Britain was supposed to be threatened with WMD capable of hitting it within 45 minutes of the order being given by Saddam.

As we all know it was a lie. Every agency tasked with verifying the accusation that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction could not prove it. Even the intelligence agencies of the US and Britain said that there was no weapon of mass destruction that Saddam could threaten the US or Britain or the world with. And today, after months of thorough search without Saddam and his people getting in the way, no WMD has been found.

Yet the US and UK took it upon themselves to invade Iraq in order to remove an allegedly authoritarian government. The result of the invasion is that many more people have been killed and injured than Saddam was ever accused of. Worse still, the powers which are supposed to save the Iraqi people have broken international laws on human rights, by detaining Iraqis and others and torturing them at Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and elsewhere.

So can we accept that these big powers alone have a right to determine when to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries to protect human rights?

Malaysia is concerned about human rights within its borders. It does not need the interference of foreign powers before it sets up Suhakam, a body dedicated to overseeing and ensuring that there are no abuses of human rights within its borders.

People in Malaysia seem to be quite happy. They can work and do business and make as much money as they like. There is no restriction on the freedom to move about, to go abroad even.

They have political parties that they are free to join, whether these are pro-government or anti-government. They can read newspapers, which support or oppose the government. While the local electronic media is supportive of the government, no one is prevented from watching or listening to foreign broadcasts which are mostly critical of the government.

Foreign newspapers and magazines are freely available. In fact many foreign papers, like the International Herald Tribune and Asian Wall Street Journal are printed in Malaysia and are freely available to Malaysians. Then there is the Internet which no one seems able to stop even if libelous lies are screened.

Periodically, without fail there would be elections in Malaysia. Anyone and everyone can participate in these elections. The campaigns by both sides are vigorous and hard-hitting. And the results show quite clearly that despite accusations against the government of undemocratic practices, many opposition candidates would win. In fact several states were lost to the opposition parties. Not one of the winning opposition candidates has been charged in court and found guilty of some minor breaches of the election procedure and prevented from taking his seat in Parliament as happens in a certain country.

But all these notwithstanding, Malaysia is accused of having a totalitarian government during the 22 years of my premiership. That I had released detainees on assumption of office as prime minister and I had used the ISA sparingly does not mitigate against the accusation that I was a dictator, an abuser of human rights.

And not using the ISA, not detaining a person without trial would not help either. And so when a former DPM was charged in court, defended by nine lawyers and found guilty through due process, all that was said was that there was a conspiracy, the court was influenced and manipulated and the trial was a sham. So you are damned if you use the ISA, and you are damned if you don't use the ISA.

In the eyes of these self-appointed judges of human behaviour worldwide, you can never be right no matter what you do, if they do not like you. If they like you, a court decision in your favour, even on laughable grounds, would be right.

Those are the people who now seem to appropriate to themselves the right to lay down the ground rules for human rights and who have appointed themselves as the overseers of human rights credentials of the world.

And now these same people have come up with what they call globalisation. In the first place who has the right to propose and interpret globalisation? It is certain that globalisation was not conceived by the poor countries. It was conceived, interpreted and initiated by the rich.

The globalised world is to be without borders. But if countries have no borders surely the first thing that should happen is that people would be able to move from one country to another without any conditions, without papers and passports. The poor people in the poor countries should be able to migrate to the rich countries where there are jobs and opportunities.

But it has been made clear that globalisation, borderlessness are not for people but for capital, for currency traders, for corporations, for banks, for NGOs concerned over so-called human rights abuses, over lack of democracy, etc. The flow is, as you can see, only in one direction. The border crossing will be done by the rich so as to be able to benefit their business, banks, currency traders, their NGOs, for human rights and for democracy.

There will be no flows in the opposite direction, from the poor countries to the rich, the flow of poor people in search of jobs, the NGOs concerned with human rights abuses in the rich and powerful countries where the media self-censors to promote certain parties, where dubious voting results are validated by tame courts. There will be no flow of coloured people to white countries. If they succeed they would be apprehended and sent to isolated islands in the middle of the ocean or if they manage to land, they would be accommodated behind razor-wire fence. It is all very democratic and caring for the rights of man.

If we care to look back, we will recognise globalisation for what it is. It is really not a new idea at all. Globalisation of trade took place when the ethnic Europeans found the sea passages to the West and to the East. They wanted trade, but they came in armed merchantmen with guns and invaded, conquered and colonised their trading partners.

If the indigenous people were weak, they would just be liquidated, shot on sight, their land taken and new ethnic European countries set up. Otherwise they would be made a part of empires where the sun never sets, their resources exploited and their people treated with disdain.

The map of the world today shows the effect of globalisation, as interpreted by the ethnic Europeans in history. There was no US, Canada, Australia, Latin America, New Zealand until the Europeans discovered the sea passages and started global trade.

Before the Europeans, there were Arab, Indian, Chinese and Turkic traders. There was no conquest or colonisation when these people sailed the seas to trade. Only when the Europeans carried out world trade were countries invaded, human rights abused, genocide committed, empires built and new ethnic European nations created on land belonging to others.

These are historical facts. Would today's globalisation not result in weak countries being colonised again, new empires created, and the world totally hegemonised. Would today's globalisation not result in human rights abuses?

In today's world 20 percent of the people own 80 percent of the wealth. Almost two billion people live on one US dollar a day. They don't have enough food or clothing or a proper roof over their heads. In winter, many of these people would freeze to death. The people of the powerful countries are concerned about our abuses of human rights.

But shouldn't we be concerned over the uneven distribution of wealth which deprived two billion people of their rights to a decent living, deprived by the avarice of those people who

seem so concerned about us and the unintended occasional lapses that has resulted in abuse of human rights in our country.

We should condemn human rights abuses in our country but we must be wary of the people who want to destabilise us because we are too independent and we have largely succeeded in giving our people a good life, and despite all the criticism, we are more democratic than most of the friends of the powerful nations of the world.

The globalisation of concern for the poor and the oppressed is sheer hypocrisy. If these people who appears to be concerned are faced with the situation that we in Malaysia have to face sometimes, their reactions and responses are much worse than us. At Guantanamo detention camp the detainees, some of whom are not even remotely connected with terrorism, are tortured and humiliated. At Abu Ghraib, the most senior officers actually sanctioned the inhuman treatment of the detainees.

When forced by world opinion to take action against those responsible for these reprehensible acts, the culprits were either found not guilty or given light sentences. They were tried by their own courts under their own laws. Their victims were not represented. The countries where the crimes were committed were denied jurisdiction. Altogether the whole process was so much eyewash. Yet these are the countries and the people who claim that Malaysian courts are manipulated by the government, that abuses of rights are rampant in Malaysia. And Malaysian NGOs, media and others lapped it up.

We must fight against abuses of human rights. We must fight for human rights. But we must not take away the rights of others, the rights of the majority. We must not kill them, invade and destroy their countries in the name of human rights. Just as many wrong things are done in the name of Islam and also other religions, worse things are being done in the name of democracy and human rights. We must have a proper perspective of things. Two wrongs do not make one right. Remember the community have rights too, not just the individual or the minority.

We have gained political independence but for many the minds are still colonised.

Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a former prime minister of Malaysia and a leading antiwar critic.

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