# Ending Double Standards: Human Rights and the World Today

***Salil Shetty, Secretary General, Amnesty International, 1 March, 2012***

Thank you for inviting me to speak here today. It is a great pleasure to be at Harvard Law School.

CHANGE OVER THE YEARS:

I am sometimes asked about whether I think the world is a better or a worse place since the foundation of Amnesty International fifty years ago.

There are of course many different ways of answering the optimism vs pessimism question. But if we look at how few or how many countries in the world are dictatorships or democracies, the answer must surely be positive.

We continue to see some truly horrific things in the world, and it is Amnesty International’s job to highlight those abuses. But we have also, over the years, seen some extraordinary possibilities of change.

ACHIEVING THE UNACHIEVABLE:  
Politicians often like to boast of their “pragmatism” – a word which can mean different things to different people. The dictionary defines pragmatic as “having concern more for matters of fact than for theories”, which all sounds very admirable. There is, after all, no point in living in the world of the unreal.

Sometimes, though, politicians treat aspirations as “unreal” merely because their own imaginations are too narrow. History has repeatedly shown us that that can be a grave mistake. Take, for example, the distinguished foreign minister who categorically pronounced that a treaty banning deadly cluster bombs was unachievable “in the real world”; his own country, and more than 100 others, signed up for an international ban, just eighteen months later.

The first and most obvious example of that is the creation of Amnesty International itself from a single newspaper article – endlessly reprinted, in the months to come. Today, when the organization has reached its fiftieth birthday and has millions of members all around the world, the achievements are plain enough for all to see.

And yet, when Peter Benenson, the founder of Amnesty International, first set out in his Observer article, The Forgotten Prisoners, the argument that large numbers of people around the world simultaneously demanding change might have impact, he was mocked. One critic described the idea as – and I quote - “one of the larger lunacies of our time”.

Well, huge numbers disagreed with that judgement – and rightly so. In the years since then, countless prisoners of conscience have been released as a result of the pressures from Amnesty International and its members around the world.

The very human rights architecture that is now in place – from the UN Convention against Torture to the International Criminal Court – is strongly influenced by Amnesty International and the human rights movement more generally.

Those who argued for years for a Convention against Torture, and for its implementation, knew they were dreamers – but they knew that the ban must be achieved.

Those who argued for an International Criminal Court, which can prosecute serious war crimes and crimes against humanity anywhere in the world, were also accused of a lack of “realism”. And yet, a broad coalition of non-governmental organizations – sometimes working hand in hand with committed diplomats within government – ensured that the court became real.

The US government is still – sadly –not a party to the International Criminal Court. None the less, the shrill rejection of the Court that we used to hear from characters like John Bolton, President Bush’s ambassador to the UN, comes from a different era. Despite the continuing grumbles, the new reality is at least partly accepted.

The US government has in the past few years already given its blessing to two referrals by the Security Council to the ICC – on Darfur (in 2005, during the presidency of George W. Bush, whose own administration had once expressed such words of loathing for the court) and on Libya (in 2011, during the Obama presidency, when the US did not merely abstain, but actively voted in favour of a referral to the court). The new “realism” means that international justice is here to stay.

Bolton and other opponents of the court liked to insist that the ICC contradicts the ideals of the US. Bolton believed that America should – in his words - “isolate [the Court] through our diplomacy, in order to prevent it from acquiring any further legitimacy or resources”.

## “REALISM”, OR DOUBLE STANDARDS

Still, however, we see a perverse “realism” – which in fact ignores greater realities – taking hold in many contexts.

An old US presidential saying declared, “He may be a sob, but at least he is our sob”. That cheerful summary of foreign policy was originally with reference to Latin American dictators. But the same logic applied all over the world. Especially through the long years of the Cold War, that “at least he’s our sob” philosophy seemed to trump all.

Turning a blind eye to torture and murder was acceptable – as long as the egregious human rights violations benefited “our” side.

Sadly, that philosophy partly continues today – the readiness to speak out about the sins of political enemies, but not about abuses committed by political friends.

Any government which purports to be interested in improving the world situation on human rights must understand that “pick’n’choose” is not a viable option. Human rights violations need to be called for what they are – wherever and whenever they occur.

SUPPORT FOR MUBARAK:  
The double standards have been especially glaring across the Middle East and North Africa in the past year, in the human rights revolutions that have come to be known as the Arab Spring.

The crimes under Hosni Mubarak in Egypt were neither new nor surprising. Indeed, during the protests last year we dug out a letter that Amnesty International had written to Hosni Mubarak shortly after he became leader in 1981. We encouraged him not to repeat the abuses committed by his predecessor. In particular, we called on Mubarak to end the imprisonment and persecution of political activists and to abolish legislation that put unfair constraints on the freedoms of individuals.

Sadly, as we all know, he ignored that advice....

It is worrying enough that repressive leaders are ready to suppress the aspirations of the people they rule. More worrying still is when powerful governments are ready to look the other way.

Mubarak’s police and security forces abused and tortured their own citizen for years. The US government, meanwhile, was happy and even eager to deliver people up for torture, while offering fulsome support to the Mubarak government, for the alleged “stability” that he could bring.

There was no such stability. The repressive apparatus gave merely a thin veneer of stability. Underneath, the society was in turbulence – as the protests of the past year have made clear.

In Egypt and across the Middle East and North Africa, the clearcut division that the purists sometimes like to make in the human rights world - between civil and political rights on the hand and economic social and cultural rights, on the other - was exposed as meaningless. Demonstrators in Tahrir Square and across Egypt called for the end of repression, the downfall of Mubarak, and for the end of poverty and inequality. Freedom from being beaten, freedom from the lawlessness of the authorities, freedom from the corruption that was the daily experience of anybody living in Mubarak’s Egypt. Dignity to be allowed to live their lives as they would wish to with decent livelihoods.

Western governments, meanwhile, refused until the last moment to back the courage and aspirations of the Egyptian people, in demanding change. Indeed, those Egyptians who demanded change found themselves described as “unrealistic”. (That word again.) As late as December 2011, a senior US politician – a very senior politician, if you prefer -- was explaining to Amnesty International and other leading NGOs why change in Egypt was unthinkable any time soon. Well, we know just how wrong her particular prediction proved to be.

Even in Libya, the double standards were never far away. The political rhetoric implied that Western governments were ready to do anything possible to put pressure on Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and his government.

The reality has looked rather different, for good “pragmatic” reasons. In the officially proclaimed “war on terror”, the UK and US vied with each other for who could cooperate most productively with Gaddafi’s torturers.

Papers discovered at Gaddafi’s security headquarters after the fall of the regime revealed the extent of the collaboration. Thus, for example, a senior member of MI6, the British foreign intelligence service, sent the head of Gaddafi’s spy agency, a cooing note with regrets that had not been able to join for a cosy end of year get together: “Dear Moussa, such a shame you couldn’t join us for Christmas lunch.”

On a different occasion, the British were eager to deliver somebody who Gaddafi wanted, into Gaddafi’s hands. They helped with Sami al-Saadi’s effective kidnap in Hong Kong, where he was put on a plane back to Tripoli.

The Americans were eager not to be left out. They offered the Libyan authorities that they were ready to pay for the plane if need be – in full knowledge of just how brutal Gaddafi’s security jails could be, and therefore what awaited al-Saadi on his arrival in Tripoli. “If payment of the charter aircraft is an issue,” said the helpful note from the CIA found in Tripoli last year, “our service would be willing to assist financially to help underwrite those costs.” US taxpayers, in other words, paying for a chartered taxi service to Gaddafi’s torturers, all in the name of some higher good. Meanwhile, the European Union was happy to cooperate with Libya on migration controls, trampling on people’s rights by doing so.

Even today, we still see that governments are often reluctant to address human rights violations on their own merits.

Instead, they continue to judge everything in terms of political friends and foes. (Broadly: “who can be helpful to us right now?”) And then they decide which human rights deserve to be talked about, and where it would be better to keep quiet or even to pretend that things are better than they are.

Speaking out on the horrific abuses now taking place in Syria, as the US and European governments have done, is right. Indeed, those who fail to speak out will have some serious explaining to do.

Thousands have been killed – including more than five and a half thousand civilians, and counting. As one Syrian recently told an Amnesty International researcher who was gathering testimonies for our next report: “Countless pages won’t be enough to record everything we have seen or heard.”

In the context of such terrible bloodshed, the refusal by Russia and China to back a critical resolution on Syria at the UN Security Council is historically shameful. There can be no question about that.

And yet:

What about, say, Bahrain? How much have we heard from Western governments about human rights abuses in Bahrain?

Answer: very little. And yet, the Bahraini government has failed to deliver the human rights changes that were recommended by an independent international commission in the country.   
  
The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry – which was much truer to its “independent” name than the Bahraini government probably ever dreamed of – has called on the government to release all those held solely for peaceful participation in protests and to bring all those responsible for the gross human rights violations committed during the last year to account. The government promised to do that by the end of February. It has failed to do so.

Two weeks ago [On February 14,] protests were held to mark the first anniversary of the start of anti-government protests. Scores were arrested, and many were beaten. Dozens remain in detention and are at risk of torture and other ill-treatment.

Human rights activist Naji Fateel was among those who were caught in the teargassing. Fateel was charged with ‘illegal gathering’. His family has not been allowed to visit him. His case is just one of many that Amnesty International is following.

We hear little about these continued abuses, any more than we hear clear condemnation of continued repression in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, a group of activists, including leading reformers, were given jail sentences a few months ago [November] of up to 30 years for the crime of attempting to create a human rights organization in the country. In Saudi, knowledge can literally be a crime: one man was charged with possession of an article on Saudi Arabia by a distinguished professor at King’s College, London.

The silence on violations in countries like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia is morally wrong. In addition, and as importantly, it fails the true “realism” test, if you are looking for long-term stability.

Without human rights, true stability can never be achieved. That is a lesson which governments seem reluctant to learn.

OLD ABUSES, NEW ABUSES:  
Getting rid of bad leaders does not of course automatically bring good new practices.

The astonishing bravery of the people on Tahrir Square and across Egypt led to changes, including the fall of Mubarak, which had long seemed unthinkable. Hundreds of thousands came together and demanded change – cheered on by millions around the world who believe that human rights matter.

But even after Mubarak’s departure, the violations continued. In Cairo last spring, shortly after the revolution, I was struck by the pessimism of many of those I talked to. And they were right to be critical.

For all important decisions, the military still called the shots. When I met with the military leadership, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, they defended the continued use of military trials, which were even more frequent than under Mubarak’s regime. They defended the unacceptable forced virginity tests, too, which were imposed on scores of women protesters.

Admittedly, the head of military intelligence – while defending their alleged usefulness -- assured me that the tests would not be repeated. But then he also assured me that violence would no longer be used against protesters, and that detainees would be properly treated. Both of those pledges have been dramatically broken in the months since then. Egypt's security forces continue to kill protesters with the same brutal tactics used in Hosni Mubarak’s last days in power, using lethal force in policing protests in Cairo and Suez and elsewhere.

Security forces fired tear gas at protesters without warning and without justification of violence on the protesters’ side.

The registration numbers on some of the tear gas canisters showed them to be US-made. That was just one reminder – though no more reminders should be needed – of the importance of a robust arms trade treaty, which will be negotiated at the United Nations in New York in four months’ time. It is important to ensure that there are guarantees that weapons cannot be traded with countries where there is a substantial risk of human rights violations. The United States is currently resisting the insertion of such language into the treaty. I encourage you to do everything posible to protest that untenable position.

Egypt is not the only country where an apparent victory for human rights and democracy has come to seem much less of a bright shining victory than governments would sometimes like to suggest.

The fall of Colonel al-Gaddafi, for example, spelt an end to one set of abuses. And yet, a recent Amnesty International report showed that the lawless violence by government-backed militias has continued to grow. Double standards again.

Those perceived as previously loyal to Gaddafi are now being singled out for violent retribution – the very opposite of the “rule of law” that we were promised. Unlawful detention and torture --sometimes to death – has become widespread. African migrants and refugees have been targeted, and revenge attacks have been carried out, forcibly displacing entire communities.   
  
Militias in Libya are largely out of control: the blanket impunity they enjoy only encourages further abuses.

David Cameron talks of being “immensely proud” of the changes in Libya. But he and his colleagues are reluctant to talk about the abuses that are continuing today.

The trouble is: the use of double standards by governments only helps to provide an alibi for other governments who are in search of an excuse not to confront human rights abuses with the robustness which is needed.

The same holds true of business: it is hardly possible to criticize the ethics of Chinese companies if Western companies themselves show little interest in human rights. In the Niger delta, Shell has shamefully ignored its responsibilities, failing to clear up oil spills and thus causing damage to tens of thousands of people’s lives. More than 25 years after the Bhopal disaster in India, Dow Chemical has still failed to provide fair compensation or access to the medical care they need. There are many more such examples, a reminder that corporate accountability finally needs to be made real.

The Western governments no longer command the political clout that they once did. The description of the US as the world’s only “hyperpower”, so popular just a few years ago, is no longer tenable. The BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa – and other countries of the global south wield influence much greater than was thinkable until just a few years ago.

Those five countries alone include 40 per cent of the world’s population, and include powerful economic growth. The tide of power going southwards becomes even stronger if we include countries like Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, South Korea and Turkey. The rebalancing of power is both an opportunity and a challenge.

It is dismaying – if unsurprising -- that Russia and China were ready to veto a UN Security Council resolution on Syria that had been endorsed by the Arab League, calling for an end to the violence against unarmed protesters. Those countries’ actions will, however, place them on the wrong side of history.

Meanwhile, countries like Brazil, South Africa, and my native country, India, can all play an important role as voices of democracy. And yet their role so far on the international stage has been mixed.

South Africa has blocked resolutions in the U.N. on Burma, failing to protest at official repression there. India refused to comment on what a UN panel of experts described as “a grave assault on the entire regime of international law” in neighbouring Sri Lanka, during the last months of the conflict there in 2009.

In short, there are plenty of challenges. But the Polish poet Stanislaw Baranczak, who teaches here at Harvard, wrote more than 30 years ago about the enormous possibilities of change, if we only begin to believe in change.

In his words, in a poem called Those Men, So Powerful:  
”you were so small

compared to them, who always stood above

you, on steps, rostrums, platforms,

and yet it is enough for just one instant to stop

being afraid, or let’s say

begin to be a little less afraid,

to become convinced that they are the ones,

that they are the ones who are afraid the most”

Baranczak was right: courage and solidarity can move mountains.

I hope that governments will learn that simple truth.

Tyrants should learn to be afraid, very afraid

And more democratic governments should learn that the same standards need to apply, all around the world.

If they do so, I believe that extraordinary things can be achieved.

We can draw inspiration from what the people not just in the Middle East and North Africa but across the world have shown they can accomplish through collective action in the last year alone

I thank you, and look forward to your questions.

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