

# Human Rights Report Show Many Countries Simply Don't Know What's Going On

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Human rights reports are important because they make US policymakers aware of what's going on in the world. They give information to Congress, they give information to the Executive Branch, specifically on what's happening in countries all over the world. They also provide a very good source of information for others - the United Nations uses them, other governments use them, nongovernmental activists use them. They're also very useful to people living within the country.

People in many countries simply don't know what's going on, and so the country reports provide the definitive source or the best source of information of what's happening in their own country, and it allows them to become more active.

There are many reports on human rights written every year, a lot by nongovernmental organizations like Amnesty International. Those reports are invaluable, but they don't have the same scope or breadth as what the State Department does. We report on 194 countries in the world. The reports are comprehensive, they're detailed, they have the advantage of the United States government and its diplomats and experts participating. So this is a more comprehensive report and it's a more detailed report.

When the human rights reports were first mandated by Congress in the mid-1970s, people in the State Department really didn't have a clear sense of how to do it. The first reports covered only a handful of countries that were receiving U.S. military assistance, and then over time, they expanded to cover essentially the entire world. They also have become much more detailed, much more professional, much more important in terms of the information they convey. It's been an iterative or an evolving process where the State Department has become better and better at the information collecting and reporting, and it's now a quite extraordinary document.

As the human rights reports have gained greater prominence, people in the Congress and in the public have said increasingly, "Why are we not covering one issue or another?" So over time, over 30 years, there's been an evolution to include a range of issues that nobody was reporting on 20, 25 years ago. I think that's a good thing, it's inevitable, and part of the challenge now is to write a report is understandable and not overwhelming. Some of the reports now are 90, a hundred pages, and one of our challenges is to write a report that people can read and understand. But I think the information is excellent.

There are several trends that we identify in the report. One is that increasingly, governments are becoming more restrictive in their tolerance of nongovernmental human rights organizations, in particular. They're trying to constrain their ability to register and to operate. They're trying to constrain their ability to receive foreign funding. And that's a trend that we see dramatically in the last several years. At least 25 governments have enacted new laws or regulations that restrict that.

Another trend that we see, which is, I think, a part of the world we live in, is that a number of human rights violations are carried out both by governments and by armed groups opposing them. And the context of national security becomes very important. Governments misuse or overuse concepts of national security to impose draconian restrictions on people, but at the same time, those national security emergencies are real in many places.

A third trend we see is that there is now a growing reliance by both activists and by governments to use the new communications media - the internet and telephone text messaging and the like - as both a form of advocacy - a lot of activists use it - but governments are also very aware of the power of these new media and are trying to control it and control those using it in ways that are really troubling and also invading personal privacy.

Well, there are, sadly, lots of vulnerable groups that are often on the receiving end of human rights violations - refugees, displaced people, LGBT, people who are refugees and migrants, young children, and women. These are groups that often are on the receiving end of the worst violations. And part of our challenge as the government is to both highlight what happens to those vulnerable groups, but more importantly, to try to figure out what we can do to protect them.

One of the challenges, one of the criticisms of the report over the years has been that we report on the whole world, except for ourselves. And Secretary Clinton has made it very clear, as has the President, that we adhere to a single, universal standard of human rights and apply it to everyone, including ourselves.

What that means, practically, is that we're beginning to do the same kind of reporting on the United States. And so under the Universal Periodic Review, the new procedure of the UN Human Rights Council, in the fall, we're going to be issuing a comprehensive report on the United States to the United Nations. We're in the middle of doing consultations with human rights, civil rights groups around the country. We'll produce something over the summer and go and defend it sometime in the fall in Geneva.

We've also made a commitment - Secretary Clinton has - to include the United States in the evaluation of trafficking. So we've done, for a decade or more, reports on trafficking and abuses in the world. This year, for the first time, we're also going to look at the United States

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