

**TESTIMONY OF ACTING ASSISTANT SECRETARY UZRA ZEYA
BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND LABOR**

Before the

**HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
STATE, FOREIGN OPERATIONS, AND
RELATED PROGRAMS SUBCOMMITTEE**

February 26, 2014

Chairwoman Granger, Ranking Member Lowey, and Members of this Committee, thank you for inviting me to this important hearing to discuss how the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) works as part of broader U.S. efforts to support freedom in closed societies. This hearing is very timely as Secretary Kerry will release the annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* tomorrow, which, through our rigorous monitoring and reporting, serves as an accurate, objective assessment of human rights conditions in countries around the world.

In the past two years alone, we have seen more than 50 new laws proposed or enacted to restrict freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression, both online and offline. Last year, the *UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association* released a troubling report on negative trends affecting civil society, stating that NGOs worldwide face “increased control and undue restrictions” on both foreign and local funding, measures designed to “silence the voices of dissent and critics.” In many countries independent media are also under siege. Prosecution for alleged extremism or libel, economic pressure from the state, and physical threats to journalists/editors reporting on corruption or other abuses are on the rise. Many governments have new laws that allow authorities to block websites for vague and broadly defined prohibited material.

But there is a way forward. American efforts to advance human rights can make a difference in the lives of millions and in encouraging stability around the world – even in repressive environments. In closed societies, for example, one of our strategies is to provide citizens who want to exercise their human rights, and those who defend them, with the tools and capacity to communicate securely and freely with one another and the outside world. As governments in countries such

as China, Cuba, Iran, and Russia devise new ways of tracking and blocking online expression, we support programs that adapt, update, and innovate to effectively assist those seeking to exercise their rights online and through new technologies.

The majority of DRL programming is implemented in repressive, authoritarian or transitioning countries, including where the United States has no diplomatic presence. In repressive environments, our partnerships empower local NGOs and citizens to press for reforms and build foundations for accountable governance. We support the efforts of human rights activists as they work to build democratic institutions, support access to justice, create independent media, and document human rights abuses. Our programs help populations-at-risk, and advance international religious freedom, labor and disability rights, and transitional justice. We promote religious freedom and counter religious intolerance, anti-Semitism, and violent extremism. In the face of increasingly sophisticated tactics for disrupting activism online, our programs protect users, help activists obtain independent information, and support policy/advocacy projects in countries seeking to restrict Internet freedom. We support those promoting freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining.

DRL's mechanism to support this work is the Human Rights and Democracy Fund (HRDF). Since its creation fifteen years ago, the Fund has grown from a mere \$8 million in FY1998 to \$70.5 million in FY2014. Together with ESF transfers, this past year we managed nearly 350 grants totaling over \$500 million that benefit civil society and activists around the world in their struggle to live in freedom and with dignity. We are grateful for the continued support from this Committee; support that makes HRDF programming possible.

HRDF functions like a "venture capital fund for freedom," enabling us to respond quickly and flexibly to changing needs and opportunities to promote human rights. DRL is able to administer programs in ways that allow the HRDF to be flexible, adaptable and responsive to complex and changing situations on the ground, while mitigating risk to both our implementing partners and local beneficiaries. Thanks to the effectiveness of our programs, I am pleased to note that 30 other governments and private sector donors are helping to fund some of our signature human rights initiatives, from aiding embattled NGOs on the frontlines to countering cyber-attacks on activists and assisting vulnerable populations. These unique public-private and multilateral partnerships mean that we are able to leverage our funds to extend the reach of our work in supporting freedom in tough environments abroad. We also make sure that our programs are well coordinated with USAID, and NED, and would note that AID participates in DRL's proposal review panels.

One of our most innovative and effective HRDF areas of programming has been Internet freedom. Our Internet freedom programs have helped millions around the world. DRL's approach to Internet freedom is derived from our unique democracy and human rights mandate, which guides us to strategically target our Internet freedom funding to strengthen the exercise of freedom of expression online. We work to increase the free flow of information and to deny a government's ability to perpetuate human rights abuses by tracking, censoring, and disrupting communications. This approach also helps to hold accountable those who perpetrate and facilitate abusive activities. We support technology that provides uncensored access to content, tools that promote the digital security of activists and vulnerable populations, strategic advocacy resources for human rights defenders, and advances research on where and how Internet controls are being applied. Over the past six years, DRL has provided more than \$120 million in support for Internet freedom technologies and organizations. Rand Corporation conducted an independent evaluation to assess the efficacy of DRL's comprehensive program strategy, including DRL investments in technology development, advocacy, digital safety training, and research. Rand concluded that DRL's Internet Freedom portfolio is well balanced in that it goes beyond just focusing on the problem of circumventing firewalls. Rand noted that DRL's investment allocation and the range of geographic and political focus of grants contributes to its success.

Our approach to designing effective assistance programs can be considered in three categories: non-permissive environments; countries of such regional significance that their backsliding would have a contagion effect; and countries recently emerging from conflict or authoritarianism with an uncertain future. We must sustain efforts in all these environments.

In the face of growing restrictions, DRL remains undeterred. We are using our diplomacy and our foreign assistance to mitigate risk while sustaining vital support. In non-permissive environments, we directly reach out to and support civil society and activists. In the wake of ongoing repression of civil society worldwide, DRL has adjusted operating procedures and applied lessons-learned to our approach. Doing so has enabled us to continue our work even in the least hospitable environments by employing methods aimed at protecting the identity of our beneficiaries, reducing the risk of exposure to oppressive governments. Let me be clear on this. Our programs are overt, are notified to Congress, and we acknowledge them publicly. But what we try to avoid is doing anything that would help an authoritarian government take repressive actions against or punish our partners.

Beyond adapting our processes, we have vastly expanded our capacity to assist threatened human rights activists and organizations by providing them small infusions of support -- real-time help to allow them to continue their work in safety. DRL's signature efforts provide emergency assistance to human rights activists attacked or under threat. One program delivers direct assistance -- such as medical, legal, psychosocial, and other support services -- to human rights defenders, so that they can continue their work. Since 2007, DRL has provided assistance to 1,336 defenders in 84 countries and territories. Three years ago we launched the *Lifeline: Embattled Civil Society Organizations Assistance Fund* to offer emergency grants to civil society organizations advancing human rights, including the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, women, and people with disabilities. Sixteen other governments and two foundations have since joined this unique global effort that has so far assisted 299 civil society organizations in more than 74 countries. We have since created similar programs to directly assist victims of religious persecution and anti-LGBT violence and discrimination.

In China, the human rights environment continues to deteriorate. Although the Communist party's monopoly on power remains absolute, growing numbers of citizens seek justice, an accountable and transparent government, and the ability to express themselves freely and peacefully assemble and associate. The Chinese government has cracked down on rights lawyers, civil society activists, friends and associates of activists, and everyday citizens expressing themselves online or seeking to practice their faith free of state control. Authorities also target civil society groups critical of the government, including the New Citizens Movement, a group that has urged the government to increase transparency and combat corruption. In Tibetan and Uighur areas, authorities have increased restrictions on fundamental freedoms.

DRL funds target projects that will have a direct and lasting effect by promoting reforms and bolstering civil society to improve respect for human rights in China. Program activities seek to promote the rule of law, expand public participation in governance, and create space for religious freedom. For example, one DRL-funded program supports the implementation of legal reform in the criminal justice system, and builds the capacity of public interest lawyers. Other programs work to protect vulnerable populations such as religious and ethnic minorities and persons with disabilities, and encourage government adherence to international human rights norms. DRL programs also build the capacity of grassroots civil society groups, and take advantage of technological developments to enable greater freedom of expression.

United States commitment to engaging Russian civil society remains firm despite the enactment of laws and practices in Russia that restrict fundamental freedoms and ability of local and civil society organizations to receive international support. The United States has and continues to make our concerns about restrictions known to the Russian government. We convey support for a legal framework that does not restrict fundamental freedoms, and underscore that a vibrant civil society is essential to Russia's development. Although the traditional routes for supporting these groups have been challenged, Russian organizations continue to express a desire to engage with the United States. As a result, the Administration is developing new ways to increase direct interactions between Russians and Americans, including by establishing peer-to-peer and other regional programs that support exchanges of best practices on civil society development. We remain committed to supporting the people of Russia in their pursuit of democratic, justice, and human rights objectives, including those related to fighting corruption and creating a more pluralistic and participatory society with viable, independent, and accountable institutions.

DRL programs in Cuba support the people's desire to freely determine their own future by advancing democratic values, promoting human rights, facilitating the flow of uncensored information, and strengthening independent civil society. Although Cuban government restrictions on civil and political rights -- including the freedoms of expression, association and assembly -- increase the degree of difficulty of program implementation, DRL has been able to sustain support to Cuban civil society.

In a highly restrictive environment like Iran, we speak in support of Iranians' human rights and fundamental freedoms as we test the potential for a diplomatic resolution of the nuclear issue. We led efforts to establish and extend the mandate of the *UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran* at the UN Human Rights Council. Our "Faces of Iran" campaign on HumanRights.gov and the Virtual Embassy Tehran website highlights the plight of Iranians unjustly imprisoned for political or religious reasons, garnering strong support from Iranian citizens and human rights activists. We continue to press for the immediate release and safe return of dual U.S.-Iranian citizen pastor Saeed Abedini, whom Iranian authorities sentenced to eight years in prison on charges related to his religious beliefs. We are committed to doing all we can to ensure Mr. Abedini's safe return to his family, as we are doing for Amir Hekmati and Robert Levinson.

As evidenced in the landmark *UN Commission of Inquiry* report issued on February 17, North Korea has committed and continues to commit systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations. The government is responsible for

extrajudicial killings, disappearances, arbitrary arrests, detention, and torture. A vast network of political prison camps indefinitely holds an estimated 80,000-120,000 people in harsh and life-threatening conditions, including family members of the accused. Through the Human Right Democracy Fund programming, we have been able to assist with the credible documentation of these atrocities, and will continue to do so. The regime continued to control almost all aspects of citizens' lives, denying freedoms of expression, religion, association, and peaceful assembly. It also continues to tightly control all forms of media, severely restricts freedom of movement, and subject its citizens to forced labor. We remain steadfast in support of the free flow of objective information in and out of North Korea, including through independent radio broadcasting by North Koreans who escaped.

Looking beyond closed societies, DRL is also sustaining support in countries emerging from conflict or where democratic institutions have never had an opportunity to flourish, and we can point to areas of impact and progress. In Iraq, DRL's work to protect and promote the rights of members of vulnerable populations has included programs to combat gender-based violence (GBV) and to support Iraq's minority communities, especially Christians and Yezidis. DRL supported the formation of the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities, comprised of ethnic and religious minority leaders, enhancing their advocacy for the inclusion of minority groups and the rights of their members within Iraqi law and society. In Ninewa province, one of Iraq's most volatile areas, a DRL program supported minority leaders to review the provincial budget by engaging community leaders and the provincial council. The mediation process led not only to a more equitable allocation of provincial funds, but to a shift in the community's perception of Christians and other minorities. Now they are seen as members of Iraqi society working for the good of the whole community, rather than being seen as apart from mainstream society. We also facilitated the GBV legislation that condemned female genital mutilation in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, with the success of reaching a 35 percent reduction in female genital mutilation in the provinces reached by our programming.

Pakistan is another country where sustained U.S. engagement remains crucial to maintain momentum after the recent transition between civilian governments, especially in ensuring accountability. Thus, we support the efforts of courageous journalists who work in the tribal areas, where the most extreme militants are active. Our program has trained journalists, who are in danger every day, on how to report credible investigations of issues related to national security, while at the same time enhancing their security. We have provided them with production grants, mentoring, and tools to report their stories. In addition, we have

been able to help local human rights organizations expand their documentation of egregious human rights abuses by security forces. As a result of our efforts, local efforts to hold Pakistan security forces accountable for human rights violations stand on firmer ground.

Supporting democrats and human rights activists in closed societies is a long-term investment that pays significant dividends. Burma is a country where I would like to highlight the value of consistent and sustained engagement in bringing about democratic change. For more than 20 years, the United States supported those willing to risk severe prison sentences to hand out copies of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, provide information about the rights of workers, share how citizens in other autocratic countries peacefully demanded changes to the social contract, and attend trainings on democratic principles and civic activism. The U.S. government's leadership; its provision of safe access to the Internet and other information resources; and, its support for bloggers, journalists, artists, monks, students, lawyers, rights activists, and opposition political parties – have all made a critical difference.

The United States policy of principled engagement in Burma encouraged and supported leaders in the Government of Burma to undertake democratic reforms and create opportunities for the people of Burma to demand their rights. We cannot ignore that the most significant, lasting changes in repressive countries come from domestic champions who dedicate and often risk their lives to win freedom. The Burmese activists who are instrumental in developing and reforming their country and creating a strong and vibrant civil society would be the first to tell you that human rights and democracy have a long way to go in Burma. But activists are better able to continue that struggle because of the solidarity the United States and others have shown in their cause. I believe that further reform is possible because civil society in Burma now has the space and capacity to push for further changes. A strong, diverse and vibrant civil society must serve as Burma's moral compass as the country confronts challenges of bigotry and prejudice. We are confident these lessons apply to other authoritarian environments, where dividends from our investments may not show immediately, but can deliver meaningful long-term change.

The focus of this hearing is programming, however in closing I want to emphasize that our assistance, policy and diplomacy are mutually reinforcing. And on behalf of the Secretary and together with colleagues across the Department of State and USAID, DRL is hard at work using a range of diplomatic tools to advance freedom and human rights. We oppose NGO laws by governments that unduly constrain civil society. We make the case that countries become more

prosperous and stable as a result of unfettered freedom of expression, assembly and association. We raise these issues in bilateral discourse, human rights and legal experts dialogues, and in regional and multilateral fora. We meet with minority groups who feel isolated and endangered, and partner with civil society organizations. We raise human rights cases bilaterally and multilaterally, publicly and privately. We monitor and attend trials of political dissidents, and work quietly and publicly for the release of those unjustly imprisoned. We work to strengthen the rule of law, judicial independence, and democratic institutions. We promote political pluralism and fair electoral processes. In sum, DRL is engaged in wide range of activities to advance freedom, and we work collaboratively with our colleagues at State, USAID, Justice, Labor, Defense, and other Departments, to advance human rights, in line with the President's National Security Strategy and Stand with Civil Society.

The work of securing freedoms where they are threatened or denied is never-ending. We cannot waver in our commitment to supporting struggles for freedom because a more just and rights-respecting world means less conflict, fewer transnational threats, and more stable and effective partners for the United States. The continued active involvement of this Committee in supporting democracy, freedom, and human rights around the world is essential. We appreciate your attention to these important issues. Thank you again for the invitation to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.