



## **2<sup>nd</sup> GENEVA SUMMIT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, TOLERANCE AND DEMOCRACY**

March 8-9, 2010

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### **Opening Speech by John Suarez, International Secretary of Directorio, on behalf of the Geneva Summit coalition**

Good Morning and welcome to the 2nd Geneva Summit for Human Rights, Tolerance and Democracy. My name is John Suarez. I am a human rights activist and the International Secretary of the Cuban Democratic Directorate. The Cuban Democratic Directorate is part of a civic nonviolent resistance movement that defends before international human rights forums pro-democracy activists, human rights defenders, and members of independent civil society from the abuses of a 51-year old communist dictatorship. We publish an annual human rights report on Cuba as well as Steps to Freedom - our last two issues are available here - it is an exhaustive accounting of opposition and independent civil society activities inside of Cuba.

On behalf of the co-organizers, an international coalition of more than 25 human rights NGOs I am both honored and humbled to welcome all who have come near and far to join us today here at the Geneva International Conference Center directly across from the United Nations Human Rights Council which is now in session and all those joining via web cast from around the world.

The first Geneva Summit coincided with the Durban Review and the second summit takes place now in tandem with the main annual session of the UN Human Rights Council.

Summit organizers are honored to have human rights heroes Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa, the former presidents of the Czech Republic and Poland as co-chairs of the Geneva Summit's Honorary Committee. As we gather here and many of us are also watching, listening, and participating in the Human Rights Council session across the way and are witnessing some of the worse systematic human rights abusers exerting undue influence and power over the Council and the session. In some cases silencing victims from speaking and frustrating human rights activists I think back to both of our co-chairs.

In Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, Vaclav Havel was a dissident play write followed by secret police, imprisoned for his beliefs and in Poland Lech Walesa, an electrician working at the Gdansk shipyards before being fired in 1976 for his activities as a shop steward would later be followed and frequently detained for his independent labor activism. All this at a time when the world was convinced that these repressive communist states would go on forever.

Both have said much that is relevant to the challenges that we face today:

Months after the Warsaw Pact invaded and occupied Czechoslovakia crushing the Prague Spring and the idea of Socialism with a human face. Vaclav Havel wrote a letter to the



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overthrown Czechoslovak Communist Party chairman Alexander Dubc(ek in August of 1969 in which he stated: "Even a purely moral act that has no hope of any immediate and visible political effect can gradually and indirectly, over time, gain in political significance." That in one sentence describes the evolution of dissident movements in Communist states and their impact in shaking up a seemingly all powerful totalitarian state creating cracks in its edifice and over time tearing it down.

By 1983 Lech Walesa had played an important role in organizing labor strikes that brought the Polish communist government to the negotiating table where for the first time in a communist state an independent labor union - Solidarity - was legally recognized - only to face repression and attempts to destroy it through Martial law, but by 1983 through great repression Martial law was formally lifted but repression continued. This was the year when Walesa won the Nobel Peace Prize. He was not allowed to attend the award ceremony in Oslo but Walesa's wife Danuta was able to go in his place and read his acceptance speech in which he explained what motivated this movement: "We are fighting for the right of the working people to association and for the dignity of human labour. We respect the dignity and the rights of every man and every nation. The path to a brighter future of the world leads through honest reconciliation of the conflicting interests and not through hatred and bloodshed. To follow that path means to enhance the moral power of the all-embracing idea of human solidarity."

Through a combination of great courage, persistence, patience, civic nonviolent resistance, international solidarity, and a little luck both of these men played a crucial role in seeing that repressive totalitarian regimes in their respective countries were brought to an end without democrats engaging in bloodshed against their oppressors and today in both of their countries they and their countrymen are free to travel, express themselves, associate freely, and enjoy all those rights that many in the West have long taken for granted. Looking around the room and seeing human rights defenders from Azerbaijan, Burma, China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Tibet, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. Activists that today live in societies where fundamental human rights are systematically denied and abused. They share with Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa the real knowledge of living in countries that are not free and where exercising your fundamental human rights is an act of defiance and great courage.

One objective of the 2010 Geneva Summit is to give voice to victims of the world's worst human rights abuses and a second objective is to empower those who suffer repression under closed systems of government. The program over the next two days addresses both these goals whether they will be accomplished is up to all of us. It is a tall order because the global human rights situation is deteriorating.

In Iran, the contested June election sparked an unprecedented wave of state-sponsored violence and repression. Thousands of peaceful protesters were beaten, arrested, tortured, and



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---

killed. One of them Neda Agha-Soltan, age 27, was shot and killed on June 20, 2009 during the protests denouncing election fraud. Her death was captured on video and in those terrible moments captured reflected the great crime committed by the Iranian government against the people of Iran. Official numbers place the number of killed at 36 during the protests but the opposition places the dead at 72. In 2009 at least 270 people were hanged and in 2010 at least 12 so far. 4,000 have been arrested including journalists and reformist politicians.

In China, according to Amnesty International "...a minimum of 7,000 death sentences were handed down and 1,700 executions took place" in 2009. Chinese Dissident Liu Xiaobo was arrested on June 23, 2009 and charged with "inciting subversion of state power" for co-authoring Charter 08, a declaration calling for political reform, greater human rights, and an end to one-party rule in China that has been signed by hundreds of individuals from all walks of life throughout the country. On December 25, 2009 Liu Xiaobo was sentenced to 11 years in prison and two years' deprivation of political rights. The Beijing High Court rejected his appeal on February 11, 2010.

In North Korea, the Communist regime continues to deny all basic freedoms to its citizens. According to Amnesty International opposition of any kind is not tolerated. According to reports, any person who expresses an opinion contrary to the position of the ruling party faces severe punishment, and so do in many cases their families. Unauthorized assembly or association is regarded as a "collective disturbance", that is punishable. Religious freedom, although guaranteed by the constitution, is in practice sharply curtailed. There are reports of severe repression of people involved in public and private religious activities, through imprisonment, torture and executions. Many Christians are reportedly being held in labour camps.

In Sudan, the regime of Omar al-Bashir continues to kill thousands of innocent people with impunity. On 24 November, three prominent human rights defenders were arrested in Khartoum: Amir Suleiman, Abdel Monim Elgak and Osman Humeida and tortured in custody before being released. Amnesty International considered the three individuals to be prisoners of conscience who were detained solely because of the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and association.

In Zimbabwe, elections were followed by a wave of human rights violations that resulted in at least 180 deaths, and at least 9,000 people injured from torture, beatings and other violations perpetrated mainly by government forces. About 28,000 people were displaced from their homes.

In Cuba, the communist regime continues to systematically deny Cubans their human rights, Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez, mentioned here at the Summit last year was abducted by Cuban State security and beaten to stop her and Claudia Cadelo another blogger from



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---

attending a performance art happening celebrating nonviolence. On International Human Rights Day government organized mobs assaulted the Ladies in White as they marched for the release of Cuba's prisoners of conscience. At least 24 Cuban patients died of exposure at Mazorra, a government hospital in January of this year and when Amnesty International prisoner of conscience Orlando Zapata Tamayo initiated a water only hunger strike to demand that prisoners be treated decently in December of 2009 prison officials responded by taking away his water for more than two weeks when he was already extremely weak trying to break his spirit and failed but contributed to his death on February 23rd.

In Venezuela, the government response to those Venezuelan citizens protesting against the Chavez regime shutting down independent media outlets is to denounce those using twitter and text message as terrorists; police firing tear gas at students and a call for government supporters to prepare for battle. In the midst of all this President Hugo Chavez continues to demonize the opposition and welcomes into his ranks a high ranking Cuban official: Commander Ramiro Valdez, "a historic leader of the revolution" to address the energy crisis in Venezuela currently suffering power outages. Valdez is the Vice President of the Council of State and Minister of Communications in the Cuban government. He doesn't know much about electricity but knows how to set up the repressive apparatus of a totalitarian police state which is what he did in Cuba. Ironically, the man Hugo Chavez does not want to visit Venezuela with much experience in electricity is Lech Walesa who he has barred from entering the country. In addition to being an electrician Lech Walesa knows a thing or two about defending human rights and democracy. A skills set that Mr. Chavez views as a threat. At the same time a Spanish court offers an insight into terrorism in Venezuela but twitter/text messages sent by students are not the object of the inquiry but Mr. Chavez's ties with terrorist groups ETA and the Colombian FARC and apparent plans to assassinate the Colombian head of state.

Regrettably, the chief international body charged with protecting human rights is failing to live up to its mission to stop these and other abuses. The Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council—as acknowledged in a recent report by 17 of its 47 member states, supported by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the International Commission of Jurists—falls short in its handling of country situations, in the efficiency of the process involved in highlighting violations, and in its reactivity to crisis situations. Strong politicization of the Council, driven by bloc-based voting patterns, has led to inaction in face of atrocity and abuse. We saw this sad spectacle last week within the Council, first with the secretary general of Iran's High Council for Human Rights denying the documented and rampant instances of torture, executions, and mass detentions of Iranians followed by the Cuban Foreign Minister's speech who echoing his Iranian colleague also denied Cuba's horrible human rights record and to add insult to injury went on to blame the United States for the death of Orlando Zapata Tamayo as well as slander the deceased Cuban prisoner of conscience as a criminal.



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Little wonder that the March 1st magazine issue of Newsweek contains an article titled “The Downfall of Human Rights.” The article highlights Freedom House's report "Freedom in the World," released in January, and reveals a global decline in political freedoms and civil liberties for the fourth year in a row, the longest drop in the almost 40 years that the survey has been produced.

In his 1986 Nobel Acceptance writer, activist, and holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel issued a challenge not only to activists but to people everywhere challenging us all when he said: "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.

Amidst all the documented evils of the past year there is hope. The rise of citizen journalists, social networks, twitter, and cellphones able to document these atrocities and show them to the world is a response to Elie Wiesel's call not to remain silent to speak out and denounce repression. We've seen its impact across the world. This meeting has a focus on internet freedom, and it is necessary because the enemies of freedom recognize this technology as a profound enemy to maintaining monopoly control over information which for totalitarians is a pillar of their power.

New opportunities exist, and human rights defenders need to brainstorm and collaborate to improve activism and to offer a counterbalance to the collaboration and coordination of repressive regimes and movements. The international stage can be used to put a spotlight on the world's worst abusers. We saw it this last week when 30 NGOs from this Summit called on the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to intervene on behalf of Cuban human rights defender Nestor Rodriguez Lobaina barred by the Cuban dictatorship from attending this meeting. The Cuban ambassador protested loudly when Hillel Neuer of UN Watch raised the matter in an interactive dialogue with the High Commissioner, but Nestor on the other hand was grateful that you spoke up for his human rights. The Geneva Summit seeks to offer dissidents and human rights activists from around the world a global platform and forum to share their personal struggles, their fight for freedom and equality, and their vision for how to bring change. This past week we saw with action how it can be done and how much it upsets those who would prefer that we remain silent. Let us make sure that the victims of human rights violations receive the solidarity of people of goodwill and that the abusers be given cause to be shamed by their actions and to change there ways.