

Introduction

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2006](#) Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor March 6, 2007

These reports describe the performance of governments in putting into practice their international commitments on human rights. These fundamental rights, reflected in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, constitute what President Bush calls the "non-negotiable demands of human dignity." As Secretary Rice has said, the full promise of the UN Universal Declaration cannot be realized overnight, but it is urgent work that cannot be delayed.

The Universal Declaration calls upon "every individual and every organ of society ... to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance..."

The United States takes its human rights commitments seriously. We recognize that we are writing this report at a time when our own record, and actions we have taken to respond to the terrorist attacks against us, have been questioned. The United States will continue to respond forthrightly to the good faith concerns of others, including by means of the reports we submit periodically in accordance with our obligations under various human rights treaties to which we are a party. We are also committed to continual improvement. US laws, policies, and practices governing the detention, treatment, and trial of terrorist suspects have evolved considerably over the last five years. Our democratic system of government is not infallible, but it is *accountable*--our robust civil society, our vibrant free media, our independent branches of government, and a well established rule of law work as correctives.

The congressionally mandated country reports on human rights practices that follow are an essential element of the United States' effort to promote respect for human rights worldwide. For three decades, these annual reports have been used widely here and abroad as a reference document for assessing the progress made and the challenges that remain. They also have served as a foundation for cooperative action among governments, organizations, and individuals seeking to end abuses and strengthen the capacity of countries to protect the fundamental rights of all.

The reports review each country's performance in 2006. Each report speaks for itself. Yet, broad patterns are discernible and are described below, supported by country-specific examples. The examples we cite are illustrative, not exhaustive.

Hopeful Trends, Yet Sobering Realities

As a review of these reports shows, across the globe in 2006, men and women continued to press for their rights to be respected and their governments to be responsive, for their voices to be heard and their votes to count, for just laws and justice for all. There also was a growing recognition that democracy is the form of government that can best meet the demands of citizens for dignity, liberty, and equality. These are hopeful trends indeed, yet the reports also reflect sobering realities:

First, the advances made in human rights and democracy were hard won and challenging to sustain. While some countries made significant progress, some lagged and others regressed.

As the range of examples below demonstrates, the performance of countries varied greatly, depending on factors such as the degree of governmental commitment, institutional capacity, the extent of corruption, and the strength of civil society.

In January 2006 **Liberia's** democratically elected Unity Party government, led by Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the first female head of state in Africa, replaced the National Transitional Government of Liberia, which had served as the interim government since the end of a ruinous 14-year civil war in 2003. The government took

significant steps to correct past human rights deficiencies, including working with international partners to rehabilitate the country's justice sector and establishing a public defender's office in the capital. The president dismissed or suspended a number of corrupt government officials. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in 2005 to investigate human rights violations and war crimes committed during the civil war, began taking statements from witnesses. Despite this progress, Liberia continued to face serious human rights challenges, including a still weak judiciary, official corruption and impunity, gender-based violence, and extreme poverty that led to child labor.

Substantial reductions in killings by the armed forces and the police in politically sensitive areas of **Indonesia** continued during the year. Fifty-four generally free and fair elections were held at the provincial, regency, district, and municipal levels, most notably in December in Aceh, where a former rebel field commander won the governorship. Although inter-communal religious violence generally abated, it nonetheless persisted in some areas. The government and the courts were unable to confront past human rights abuses and atrocities both in Indonesia and in East Timor.

Morocco's human rights record showed notable progress, although problems remained. The government began to address past human rights abuses by providing compensation through the Consultative Council on Human Rights for specific cases of arrest, disappearance, and abuse during the period between 1956 and 1999. In March the government enacted an anti-torture law, although reports of torture by various branches of the security forces persisted. There was extensive and largely open debate in public and in the press, despite continuing restrictions on freedom of the press and speech. During the year the government punished some journalists who violated limitations on free speech, and many journalists practiced self-censorship. Trafficking in persons, particularly for sexual exploitation, and child labor remained issues of concern; however, both the government and civil society were increasingly active in addressing them.

The **Democratic Republic of the Congo** held its first democratic presidential and legislative elections in more than 45 years, putting an end to a three-year post-civil war transitional period. A new constitution went into force. Yet, the human rights record remained poor. In addition to simmering conflict in the east, where government control remained weak and armed groups continued to commit serious abuses, government security forces across the country also committed serious abuses with impunity.

In **Haiti**, citizens demonstrated their commitment to democracy by going to the polls three times in 2006. More than 3.5 million citizens registered to vote, and an impressive turnout estimated at more than 70 percent of registered voters participated in the first round of presidential and parliamentary elections in February. After a relatively stable and violence-free election process, voters selected President Rene Preval and filled 129 parliamentary seats. In December, Haiti held its first municipal elections in more than a decade. Yet much remains to be done to restore fully the rule of law, including an overhaul of Haiti's dysfunctional judicial system and the continued retraining and vetting of the Haitian National Police.

In **Ukraine**, notable post-Orange Revolution progress in human rights performance continued to be made. The March 2006 parliamentary elections were the freest in 15 years of independence. The country continued to make improvements in press freedom, freedom of association, and the development of civil society. Despite these gains, a number of serious problems remained, including corruption in all branches of government.

Although **Kyrgyzstan's** human rights record had improved considerably following the change to democratically elected leadership in 2005, during 2006 a week of mass yet peaceful protests culminated in the hasty adoption of an amended constitution that offered the possibility for genuine checks and balances. At the end of December, however, parliament passed another constitution negating many key checks and balances. The government also harassed foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Despite President Musharraf's stated commitment to democratic transition and "enlightened moderation," **Pakistan's** human rights record continued to be poor. Restrictions remained on freedom of movement, expression, association, and religion. Disappearances of provincial activists and political opponents continued, especially in provinces experiencing internal turmoil and insurgencies. The security forces continued to commit extrajudicial killings. Arbitrary arrest and torture remained common. Corruption was pervasive throughout the government and police forces. On a positive note, in December the National Assembly passed and President Musharraf signed the Women's Protection Bill - marking the first time in three decades that a Pakistan government successfully rolled back laws detrimental to women's rights. The law amends the 1979 rape and adultery provision of the Hudood Ordinance by transferring the offense of

rape from Pakistan Sharia law to the Pakistan Penal Code. The law also eliminates the requirement for rape victims to present four male witnesses to press charges.

Though **Egypt** held a first-ever, multi-party presidential election in 2005, in 2006 public calls for greater democratization and accountability sometimes met with strong government reaction. The continued imprisonment of former presidential candidate Ayman Nour raised serious concerns about the path of political reform and democracy in the country. Continuing a trend begun in 2005, the government arrested and detained hundreds of activists affiliated with the banned-but-tolerated Muslim Brotherhood, generally for periods lasting several weeks. Two senior judges were brought in for questioning in February for publicly calling for an independent judiciary. Egyptian police arrested and detained over 500 activists for participating in demonstrations in support of judicial independence. In addition, severe cases of torture by authorities were documented. The government also arrested, detained, and abused several Internet bloggers.

In **Kazakhstan**, the government restricted the functioning of the political opposition by enforcing onerous registration requirements and hindering or denying political party registration. The merging of progovernment parties consolidated the firm leadership of President Nazarbayev's Otan Party and left less political space to express alternative views and advocate for reform. The government harassed the political opposition via politically motivated charges and restrictions on freedom of assembly, passed laws restricting press freedom, and harassed NGOs.

Russia experienced continuing centralization of power in the executive branch, including amendments to election laws and new legislation for political parties that grants the government broad powers to regulate, investigate, limit, and even close down parties. Taken together with a compliant State Duma, corruption and selectivity in law enforcement, political pressure on the judiciary, and restrictions on the NGOs and the media, these trends resulted in the further erosion of government accountability. In Chechnya and other areas of the North Caucasus, serious human rights violations continued, including unlawful killings and abuses of civilians by both federal and Chechen Republic security forces. Rebel fighters committed terrorist bombings and politically motivated disappearances in the region. In a growing number of cases, the European Court of Human Rights held Russia responsible for these abuses.

In **Venezuela**, the Chavez government continued to consolidate power in the executive branch. The government continued to harass the opposition and NGOs and to weaken judicial independence. International observers judged generally free and fair the December presidential elections, in which President Chavez won re-election with 63 percent of the vote. In his inaugural address, President Chavez asked the National Assembly, in which his parties control 100 percent of the seats, to grant him power to rule by executive decree.

In **Fiji** and **Thailand**, militaries overthrew democratically elected governments.

A second sobering reality is that insecurity due to internal and/or cross-border conflict can threaten or thwart advancements in human rights and democratic government.

Despite the **Iraqi** government's continuing commitment to foster national reconciliation and reconstruction, keep to an electoral course, and establish the rule of law, both deepening sectarian violence and acts of terrorism seriously undercut human rights and democratic progress during 2006. Although the Iraqi constitution and law provide a strong framework for the protection of human rights, armed groups attacked human rights from two different directions: those proclaiming their hostility to the government--Al-Qa'ida terrorists, irreconcilable remnants of the Ba'athist regime, and insurgents waging guerrilla warfare; and members of Shi'a militias and individual ministries' security forces--nominally allied with the government--who committed torture and other abuses.

Although **Afghanistan** made important human rights progress since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, its human rights record remained poor. This was mainly due to weak central institutions and a deadly insurgency: the Taliban, Al-Qa'ida, and other extremist groups stepped up attacks against government officials, security forces, NGOs and other aid personnel, and unarmed civilians; and the number of suicide bombings rose dramatically during the year, as did attacks on schools and teachers. There were continued reports of cases of arbitrary arrests and detention, extrajudicial killings, torture, and poor prison conditions. In December President Karzai launched a Transitional Justice Action Plan designed to address past violations of human rights and improve the institutional capacity of the justice system.

Lebanon's significant steps toward reform following the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the subsequent withdrawal of Syrian troops after nearly three decades of occupation have been hampered since the July-August 2006 conflict between Hizballah and Israel. Before the conflict, the Lebanese government had started to remove many of the obstacles that barred political associations and parties. After Hizballah entered Israel from Lebanese territory and kidnapped and killed several Israeli soldiers, Israeli military forces responded by entering Lebanese territory. The conflict ended with an UN-sponsored cessation of hostilities. Despite the cessation of hostilities and the deployment of the Lebanon Armed Forces and UN Interim Forces in the south, Lebanese militias and Hizballah retained significant influence over parts of the country.

In **East Timor**, a series of deadly clashes between the national defense force and a variety of dissident military, police, and civilian forces led to widespread mob and gang violence in the capital. At the request of the government, forces from Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Portugal assumed responsibility for security in the capital. On August 25, the UN Integrated Mission for East Timor took over policing responsibilities. This internal conflict resulted in the displacement of approximately 150,000 people, more than 15 percent of the country's population.

Third, despite gains for human rights and democratic principles in every region of the world, much of humanity still lives in fear yet dreams of freedom.

Countries in which power remained concentrated in the hands of unaccountable rulers--whether totalitarian or authoritarian--continued to be the world's most systematic human rights violators.

In 2006 **North Korea** remained one of the world's most isolated and repressive regimes. The regime controls almost all aspects of citizens' lives, denying freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association, and restricts freedom of movement and worker rights. The constitution provides for "freedom of religious belief," but genuine religious freedom does not exist. An estimated 150,000 to 200,000 people, including political prisoners, were held in detention camps, and many prisoners died from torture, starvation, disease, and exposure.

The military government in **Burma** extensively used executions, rape, torture, arbitrary detention, and forced relocation of entire villages, particularly of ethnic minorities, to maintain its grip on power. Prisoners and detainees were subjected to abuse and held in harsh, life-threatening conditions. Surveillance, harassment, and imprisonment of political activists continued; Nobel Laureate and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi remained incommunicado under house arrest, and over 1,100 political prisoners languished in prison. The use of forced labor, trafficking in persons, conscription of child soldiers, and religious discrimination remained widespread. The government reconvened the sham National Convention, handpicking delegates and prohibiting free debate. Touted as part of a "democracy road map", the convention was designed to nullify the results of the 1990 election and adopt a new, regime-friendly constitution. The regime's cruel and destructive misrule also resulted in refugee outflows, the spread of infectious diseases, and the trafficking of drugs and human beings into neighboring countries.

The **Iranian** government flagrantly violated freedom of speech and assembly, intensifying its crackdown against dissidents, journalists, and reformers - a crackdown characterized by arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture, disappearances, the use of excessive force, and the widespread denial of fair public trials. The government continued to detain and abuse Baha'is and other religious minorities and hosted a widely condemned conference denying the existence of the Holocaust. In the lead-up to the December 15 Assembly of Experts elections in Iran, more than two-thirds of those who had applied to run - including all female candidates - were disqualified, leaving many seats uncontested. Hundreds of candidates in nationwide municipal elections also were disqualified. The government continued to flout domestic and international calls for responsible government in 2006 by supporting terrorist movements in Syria and Lebanon as well as calling for the destruction of a UN member state.

In **Zimbabwe**, the Mugabe government continued across-the-board violations of human rights. Official corruption and impunity were widespread. The 2002 Official Secrets Act and Public Order and Security Act remained in effect, severely restricting civil liberties. In the 2006 parliamentary by-elections and rural district council elections, the government's manipulation of the electoral process disenfranchised voters and skewed elections in favor of ruling party candidates. The ruling party's dominance permitted constitutional changes without wide consultation. Security forces harassed, beat, and arbitrarily arrested critics and opposition supporters. Disruptions at farms and seizures of property continued and were sometimes violent. The

campaign of forced evictions, which left 700,000 people homeless during Operation Restore Order in 2005, continued on a lesser scale. The government interfered with humanitarian organizations' efforts to provide assistance. In December Mugabe and his loyalists proposed extending his term for two years by deferring presidential elections to 2010.

In **Cuba**, the government, temporarily headed by Raul Castro due to Fidel Castro's illness, continued to violate virtually all the rights of its citizens, including the fundamental right to change their government peacefully or criticize the revolution or its leaders. In 2006 the government increased its harassment of dissidents and other citizens viewed as threats to the government, often through mob actions called "acts of repudiation" involving verbal abuse and physical attacks. Beatings and abuse of detainees and prisoners also were carried out with impunity. Although token releases of prisoners occurred during the year, at least 283 political prisoners and detainees were held at year's end, including 59 of 75 prodemocracy and human rights activists imprisoned in a March 2003 crackdown.

The **Chinese** government's human rights record deteriorated in some areas in 2006. There was an increased number of high-profile cases involving the monitoring, harassment, detention, and imprisonment of political and religious activists, journalists, and writers as well as defense lawyers seeking to exercise their rights under the law. Some of their family members also were harassed and detained. Large numbers of mass demonstrations and protests calling for redress of grievances continued and in some cases were violently suppressed. New government controls were imposed on: NGOs; the media, including the Internet; and courts and judges. Repression of unregistered religious groups and of minority groups, in particular Uighurs and Tibetans, remained a serious concern.

In **Belarus**, the Lukashenko government continued and intensified its repressive policies. The March presidential election was severely flawed. Up to 1,000 people were arrested in an ensuing crackdown on public protests against the results and many were sentenced to short jail terms. More activists and opposition members, including Aleksander Kozulin, who ran against Lukashenko in the presidential race, were sentenced to jail terms ranging from 2 to 5 ½ years.

The **Eritrean** government continued to be one of the most repressive in Sub-Saharan Africa, and its human rights record worsened in 2006. Government security forces committed extrajudicial killings; there were credible reports that security forces shot on sight individuals trying to cross the border into Ethiopia. The government escalated its campaign of arresting national service evaders as well as their relatives, and there also were credible reports indicating that some of those arrested were tortured. As it did in 2005, the government ordered several international humanitarian NGOs to leave the country, despite a severe drought in the Horn of Africa. There were continued severe restrictions on religious freedom.

The fourth sobering reality is that as the worldwide push for greater personal and political freedom grows stronger, it is being met with increasing resistance from those who feel threatened by political and societal change.

Human rights defenders and nongovernmental organizations are essential to a nation's success. In today's world, the problems confronting states are too complex even for the most powerful to tackle alone. The contributions of civil society and the free flow of ideas and information are crucial in addressing a host of domestic and international challenges. Restricting the political space of NGOs and public debate only limits a society's own growth.

In every region of the globe in 2006, there were governments that responded to the growing demands for personal and political freedom not by accepting their obligations to their people but by oppressing those who advocated for human rights and who exposed abuses, such as nongovernmental organizations and independent media, including the Internet. A disturbing number of countries passed or selectively applied laws and regulations against NGOs and journalists. NGOs and journalists also were subjected to extralegal measures, often by unknown assailants. For example:

In **Russia** in 2006, a new NGO law entered into force in April imposing more stringent registration requirements for NGOs, strict monitoring of organizations, extensive and onerous reporting requirements on programming and activities, and empowering the Federal Registration Service to deny registration or to shut down an organization based on vague and subjective criteria. Freedom of expression and media independence declined due to government pressure and restrictions. In October unknown persons

murdered human rights defender Anna Politkovskaya, a prominent journalist known for her critical writing on human rights abuses in Chechnya. The government used its controlling ownership of all national television and radio stations, as well as of the majority of influential regional ones, to restrict access to information deemed sensitive.

In **Belarus**, onerous tax inspections and NGO registration requirements made it difficult for civil society organizations to operate, and attacks against members of the independent media continued. In November prodemocracy activist Dmitry Dashkevich was sentenced to 18 months in prison for operating an unregistered NGO.

The government of **Kazakhstan** registered the opposition True Ak Zhol party after one of its co-chairmen, Sarsenbaiuly, was killed and restrictively interpreted Article 5 of the constitution to suspend foreign-funded, nonpartisan political party training activities, asserting that providing information is tantamount to financing political parties. In July President Nazarbayev signed into law restrictive media amendments deemed a step backward by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Freedom of Media Representative. The government continued to use restrictive libel laws to fine, convict, and suspend media outlets, journalists, and critics. In April a member of a suspended media outlet was brutally beaten.

Freedom of expression, association and assembly are tightly restricted in **Turkmenistan**, and the government sought to control all NGO activity. Foreign-origin satellite television is accessible throughout the country, but the government controlled all domestic media, and local journalists were prohibited from all contact with foreigners unless specifically permitted. Very limited Internet access was provided through government-owned Turkmen Telecom; no new accounts were allowed in the capital since September 2002. In August the government arrested journalists Ogulspapar Myradova, Annakurban Amanklichev, and Sapardurdy Hajiyev and sentenced them to six to seven years of imprisonment for weapons possession in a closed, summary trial. In September Myradova, a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty correspondent, died in prison under suspicious circumstances. NGOs have reported that she and her two colleagues were tortured during detention in the summer to extract confessions of weapons possession. On December 21, President Saparmurat Niyazov died.

The Government of **Uzbekistan** sought to control most NGO activity and closed down over 200 civil society organizations, including international NGOs operating in the country, citing alleged violations of the law. Independent journalists and human rights activists continued to be persecuted.

The **Syrian** government strictly controlled the dissemination of information and prohibited criticism of the government and discussion of sectarian issues, including religious and minority rights. There were detentions and beatings for individual expressions of opinion that violated these restrictions, for example the February arrest of journalist Adel Mahfouz after he called for interfaith dialogue following the controversy surrounding the depiction of the Prophet Muhammed in cartoons. The government relied on its press and publication laws, the penal code, and the Emergency Law to censor access to the Internet, and it restricted electronic media. Harassment of domestic human rights activists also occurred, including regular close surveillance and the imposition of travel bans when they sought to attend workshops and conferences outside the country.

Press freedom was at an all-time low in **Iran**, as the government closed independent newspapers *Shargh* and *Iran*, blocked access to Internet news sites--including the New York Times and BBC Farsi--and jailed journalists and bloggers. The authorities used bans against leaving the country as a weapon against journalists.

In **Burundi**, there was an increase in the arrest, detention, and intimidation of journalists and human rights activists by the government; among many other individuals, police arrested and detained for several months the president of the country's leading anticorruption NGO. A governor of one province reportedly called the country's leading human rights NGO, League Iteka, an enemy of peace, and in November a government official announced that 32 registered international NGOs in the country could face expulsion for failure to submit mandatory annual reports to the government.

In **Rwanda**, there was a restrictive atmosphere for the functioning of civil society. Domestic and international NGOs are required by law to register each year and to provide reports to the government on their activities. Authorities reportedly required some NGOs to obtain government authorization for some projects before

being allowed to access international donor funds. In addition, all NGOs were expected to join a collective intended to manage their activities.

The **Venezuelan** government continued to harass and intimidate civil society groups, most notably the leaders of the electoral watchdog NGO Sumate, whose trial for conspiracy and treason for accepting a foreign grant was indefinitely postponed but continues to hang over their heads. At year's end a draft law was under consideration in the National Assembly which, if implemented, would increase government control over NGOs' financing and restrict NGOs from working in the areas of human rights or democracy promotion. Amendments to the penal code that impose prison sentences for insulting public officials and violent attacks on journalists contributed to a climate of self-censorship. The government stepped up its harassment of independent and opposition news outlets. In December President Chavez announced that the government would not renew the broadcast license of Radio Caracas Television, the country's oldest commercial television network. The government accused the network owners of being "coup-mongers" and of violating the public trust.

In **China**, NGOs, both domestic and international, continued to face increased scrutiny and restrictions. By the end of 2006, Reporters without Borders reported that 31 journalists and 52 Internet writers were in jail. While the government encouraged use of the Internet, it also took steps to monitor its use, control content, restrict information, and punish those who violated regulations. The government imposed stricter website registration requirements, enhanced official control of online content, and expanded the definition of illegal online content. The government consistently blocked access to sites it deemed controversial, and the authorities reportedly began to employ more sophisticated technology enabling the selective blocking of specific content rather than entire websites.

Vietnam continued to monitor and restrict the Internet, blocking international human rights and news websites. Laws allow citizens to complain openly about inefficient government and corruption, but the government continued to prohibit the press from drafting articles that questioned the role of the Communist Party, promoted pluralism or multiparty democracy, or questioned human rights policy. The government forbids direct access to the Internet through Independent Service Providers and requires cybercafé owners to register the personal information of their customers and the sites visited. The government released several high-profile political and religious dissidents, including Dr. Pham Hong Son, who was imprisoned for translating articles on democracy and disseminating them over the Internet.

Genocide was the most sobering reality of all.

Almost 60 years after the adoption of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights--an expression of the outraged conscience of mankind to the enormity of the Holocaust and the cataclysm of the Second World War--genocide continued to ravage the Darfur region of **Sudan**.

Despite the January 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement ending the 22-year civil war between the north and south, and the establishment of a unity government that year, ethnic conflict continued in **Sudan**, most catastrophically in Darfur. The Sudanese government and government-backed janjaweed militia bear responsibility for the genocide in Darfur, and all parties to the conflagration committed serious abuses, including the widespread killing of civilians, rape as a tool of war, systematic torture, robbery, and recruitment of child soldiers. By the end of 2006, the Darfur conflict had resulted in at least 200,000 civilian deaths and two million displaced by the fighting. Over 234,000 refugees had fled to neighboring Chad, and both Chad and the Central African Republic experienced violent ethnic conflict along their borders with Sudan.

In spite of indicating its support for the Addis Ababa framework, the Sudanese government publicly rejected international forces for Darfur and renewed its military offensive during the latter half of 2006. The deteriorating security conditions forced some international NGOs and humanitarian organizations to scale back or suspend operations.

Defend the Defenders

If the great promise of the [UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) is to be fulfilled, the international community--and especially the world's democracies--cannot accept that today's sobering realities are

impervious to change. Indeed, they compel us to align ourselves with those who work for human dignity and political reform.

In 2006 the courageous efforts of human rights defenders were highlighted by democratic governments:

Country resolutions passed by the **United Nations General Assembly** in 2006 emphasized the need to protect human rights defenders in Iran, Belarus, North Korea, and Burma.

The **UN Democracy Fund**, growing out of an idea presented to the General Assembly by President Bush in 2004 and established in 2005, completed its first year successfully. Its board agreed to fund 125 projects out of more than 1,300 proposals submitted by over 100 countries--a disbursement of more than \$35 million in grants mostly to prodemocracy civil society organizations.

At the regional level, in June 2006 the General Assembly of the **Organization of American States (OAS)** adopted the Declaration of Santo Domingo, a groundbreaking multilateral commitment by the countries of the region to "guarantee the liberty of every person to enjoy freedom of expression, including access to uncensored political debate and the free exchange of ideas through all forms of mass media, including the Internet." The Foreign Ministers also declared their resolve to develop and encourage strategies and best practices to that effect.

The OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' Unit for Human Rights Defenders issued a report on the serious problems they face in some countries, emphasizing the need for governments to support their work.

In advance of the July **African Union** Assembly of the Heads of State, civil society organizations from 19 African countries met in Banjul, The Gambia, to develop recommendations for summit leaders regarding civil society's role in the African Peer Review Mechanism on countries' compliance with treaty obligations, ways to improve access to information by civil society, and citizenship laws that entrench discrimination. These recommendations were adopted at the summit.

In the **Broader Middle East and North Africa** region the **Forum for the Future** brought together government officials and civil society representatives from the region, along with G-8 partners, at the Dead Sea in Jordan. Nearly 50 civil society leaders representing hundreds of organizations from 16 countries of the region participated in discussions on the rule of law, transparency, women's and youth empowerment, and the legal environment for civil society organizations. They also discussed how to strengthen reform by establishing mechanisms to follow up on recommendations. Though the hardest part lies ahead--adoption and implementation of recommendations put forward by civil society--the Forum helped to open political space that did not before exist for civil society organizations to form and interact with governments in the region.

Marking International Human Rights Day in December 2006, Secretary Rice launched two important U.S. initiatives in support of human rights and democracy defenders:

She announced the creation of a **Human Rights Defenders Fund** to be administered by the State Department that will quickly disburse small grants to help human rights defenders facing extraordinary needs as a result of government repression. This funding could go to cover legal defense, medical costs, or the pressing needs of activists' families.

Secretary Rice also issued ten guiding [NGO Principles](#) regarding the treatment by governments of nongovernmental organizations. These core principles will guide U.S. treatment of NGOs, and we also will use them to assess the actions of other governments. The principles are meant to complement lengthier, more detailed United Nations and other international documents addressing human rights defenders and can help to rally worldwide support for embattled NGOs by serving as a handy resource for governments, international organizations, civil society groups, and journalists.

When democracies support the work of human rights advocates and civil society organizations, we are helping men and women in countries across the globe shape their own destinies in freedom. And by so doing, we are helping to build a safer, better world for all.

We must defend the defenders, for they are the agents of peaceful, democratic change.