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Remarks to the Press on the Release of the 2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

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Secretary of State

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Every year, the Secretary of State hosts a briefing like this one. And while in that sense it may seem routine, this event is extraordinary because of its connection to who we are as a country and to the universal aspirations we seek to make real through our foreign policy.

The idea of human rights begins with a fundamental commitment to the dignity that is the birthright of every man, woman and child. Progress in advancing human rights begins with the facts. And for the last 34 years, the United States has produced the [Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#), providing the most comprehensive record available of the condition of human rights around the world.

These reports are an essential tool – for activists who courageously struggle to protect rights in communities around the world; for journalists and scholars who document rights violations and who report on the work of those who champion the vulnerable; and for governments, including our own, as they work to craft strategies to encourage protection of human rights of more individuals in more places.

The principle that each person possesses equal moral value is a simple, self-evident truth, but securing a world in which all can exercise the rights that are naturally theirs is an immense practical challenge. To craft effective human rights policy, we need good assessments of the situation on the ground in the places we want to make a difference. We need a sophisticated, strategic understanding of how democratic governance and economic development can each contribute to creating an environment in which human rights are secured. We need to recognize that rights-protecting democracy and rights-respecting development reinforce each other. And we need the right tools and the right partners to implement the right policies.

Human rights may be timeless, but our efforts to protect them must be grounded in the here and now. We find ourselves in a moment when an increasing number of governments are imposing new and crippling restrictions on the nongovernmental organizations working to protect rights and enhance accountability.

New technologies have proven useful both to oppressors and to those who struggle to expose the failures and the cowardice of the oppressors. And global challenges of our time – like food security and climate change; pandemic disease; economic crises; and violent extremism – impact the enjoyment of human rights today, and shape the global political context in which we must advance human rights over the long term.

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Human rights are universal, but their experience is local. This is why we are committed to holding everyone to the same standard, including ourselves. This year, the United States is participating in the Universal Periodic Review process in conjunction with our participation in the UN Human Rights Council. In the fall, we will present a report, based on the input of citizens and NGOs, gathered online and in face-to-face meetings across the country attended by senior government officials. Assessing opportunities for progress and soliciting citizen engagement is one way that we demonstrate our commitment in word and deed to the basic principles that guide us toward a more perfect union and a more peaceful world.

As we work to protect human rights at home and abroad, we remember that human rights begin, as Eleanor Roosevelt said, “in small places close to home.” So when we work to secure human rights, we are working to protect the experiences that make life meaningful, to preserve each person’s ability to fulfill his or her God-given potential – the potential within every person to learn, discover and embrace the world around them; the potential to join freely with others to shape their communities and their societies so that every person can find fulfillment and self-sufficiency; the potential to share life’s beauties and tragedies, laughter and tears with the people they love.

The reports released today are a record of where we are. They provide a fact base that will inform the United States’ diplomatic, economic and strategic policies toward other countries in the coming year. These reports are not intended to prescribe such policies, but they provide essential data points for everyone in the United States Government working on them. I view these reports not as ends in themselves, but as an important tool in the development of practical and effective human rights strategies by the United States Government. That is a process to which I am deeply committed.

The timeless principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are a North Star guiding us toward the world we want to inhabit – a just world where, as President Obama has put it, peace rests on the “inherent rights and dignity of every individual.” With the facts in hand and the goals clear in our heads and our hearts, we recommit ourselves to continue the hard work of making human rights a human reality. It’s now my pleasure to invite Mike Posner, Assistant Secretary of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor to the podium.

* As of April 2010, the main switchboard for the U.S. Embassy at its new location in Soba will change to **+249-1-870-2-2000**.

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