

Report 2011: Speech by Salil Shetty, Secretary General

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Welcome. I am pleased to present the *Amnesty International Report 2011* – which covers a wide range of human rights violations in 157 countries across the world – as we raise the curtain on our 50th anniversary.

50 years since the Amnesty candle began to shine a light on repression, the human rights revolution stands on the threshold of historic change.

I say this because we are witnessing an unprecedented resolve to confront oppression, tyranny and corruption. We are witnessing clear proof that all rights are connected, equally important and a universal demand. We are witnessing a new technology coming into its own.

But this opportunity for change is fragile and it stands on a knife-edge.

This chance for change is partly born of the demands for freedom and justice that have spread like wildfire across the Middle East and North Africa.

A new generation has come of age and is saying “enough”: enough to fear, repression and corruption. Brave people from all walks of life are standing up and speaking out – often in the face of beatings, bullets, tear gas and tanks.

And as fear evaporates and as people create positive change, often at great personal cost, digital technology is widening the theatre of struggle for human rights.

This technology, and social media in particular, is helping human rights defenders and journalists to outflank and expose government attempts to suppress freedom of expression. It is helping activists to organize protests, to communicate across borders, to build solidarity.

Protestors are rejecting the notion that they have to choose between rights or development; rights or security. They are calling for an end to brutality and oppression; for an end to marginalization; for economic opportunity.

This is proof that rights cannot be ranked or traded; that all rights are interconnected and interdependent.

And the ripples are moving far beyond the Middle East and North Africa, with discontent being heard from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe.

Not since the Soviet empire crumbled and the Berlin Wall fell have so many repressive governments faced such a challenge to their grip on power.

But despite the brave call for change from people across the Middle East and North Africa, there is a serious fight-back from the forces of repression.

We are seeing this in the brutal crackdowns in Syria and Libya; and in the suppression of protest by governments in Bahrain, Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Elsewhere, repressive governments such as China and Iran are trying to pre-empt any similar revolutions in their countries.

And freedom of expression remains under threat in every world region.

Last year the world celebrated as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in Myanmar. It watched as the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo, in the face of petulant attempts to ruin the ceremony by the Chinese government.

Such people are international symbols of resistance to injustice and indignity.

But in many ways their plight is no different from that of thousands of courageous human rights defenders who – away from the international spotlight – were threatened, imprisoned, tortured and killed.

Today, human rights defenders on the frontline from Belarus, Cuba, Guatemala, Syria and Zimbabwe are here with us to share their experiences. I thank them for that.

Our report documents the stifling of freedom of expression and association in dozens of countries in every region of the world during 2010.

Almost 400 journalists were threatened or attacked in the Americas last year. Many governments in Asia made a habit of responding to critics with intimidation, imprisonment, ill-treatment and even death.

Repression manifested itself in the suppression of almost all dissent in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; in a clampdown on social activism in Russia, which included the banning and violent dispersal of demonstrations; and in North Korea's failure to even maintain the pretence of free expression.

It manifested itself in China's heavy-handed suppression of criticism that saw it fail to meet even the benchmarks in its own two-year human rights action plan.

It manifested itself in the banning of peaceful demonstrations or arrest of protestors in countries in Africa such as Angola, Benin, Cameroon and Togo.

In the European Union, a supposed bastion of freedom of expression, there were climates of intolerance for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered communities in countries such as Lithuania and Italy. France adopted legislation banning women from wearing a full face veil as an expression of their beliefs or identity.

Around the world, freedom of expression and other rights also came under attack from armed groups. Not least in a growing swathe of Afghanistan, where the Taleban and other anti-government groups effectively shut down any critical debate.

And as the struggle for rights reaches a new digital frontier, a battle is underway for control of access to information, communications and networking technology.

Events in Tunisia and Egypt have shown that government attempts to block Internet access or cut mobile phone networks can backfire. But governments are seeking to regain control.

Some, including China and Iran, are working to turn this technology into a new weapon for their secret police; to use it against activists and to disrupt their online activities; or are employing large networks of pro-government bloggers.

In countries such as Azerbaijan, China, Cuba and Vietnam, activist bloggers have been detained, held incommunicado, placed at risk of torture and imprisoned following grossly unfair trials.

The heady rise of social media and communications technology brings with it a responsibility for corporations that provide and support this technology.

We should stop them from being manipulated or becoming pawns of governments that stifle expression or spy on their own people.

All governments must remember too that they can no more justify blocking the Internet, shutting down mobile cell-phones or hacking Facebook pages than they can justify shutting down the printing press.

So how can the international community seize the opportunity and ensure that this year is not a false dawn for human rights?

Powerful governments have a key role to play. For years they have turned a blind eye to torture and brutality by regimes in the Middle East and North Africa for reasons of political convenience.

Having been caught off guard by events in Tunisia and Egypt and having been embarrassed by their own hypocrisy – not least the USA's investment in the Mubarak regime despite its systematic violation of human rights – traditionally powerful states should have learnt their lessons. But it is far from clear that they have.

Western governments are willing to take military action against Gaddafi's Libya yet continue to promote "stability" over rights in other repressive states, such as Bahrain – a state with significant geopolitical and military importance to the West.

The lack of any concerted action in response to the suppression of peaceful protests in Bahrain and Yemen is shameful. It flies in the face of a compelling need for change.

Powerful governments should back reform in full. In fact, they owe a debt to the people whose rights they sold.

An acid test of their integrity will be their support for states seeking to build or rebuild societies on foundations of human rights, regardless of whether those states are political allies.

Another critical test will be their commitment to universal justice.

The UN Security Council's unprecedented move to vote unanimously to refer Libya to the International Criminal Court – something that would have been unthinkable previously – was a pivotal moment that should be built on.

With prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo now seeking arrest warrants in his investigation into crimes against humanity in Libya – and with potential war crimes being committed in Misratah as we speak – it is crucial that the global community demonstrates the resolve to ensure that justice is done.

The bloodshed and state violence in Syria underlines the need for a consistent policy of zero-tolerance for crimes against humanity. When all other justice avenues have failed, the perpetrators of serious crimes must be referred to the International Criminal Court.

Unfortunately it is not only powerful Western governments that are out of step with people's demands for justice and accountability. The African Union Assembly's repeated refusal to cooperate with the International Criminal Court over the arrest of Sudanese President Omar Al Bashir – despite the arrest warrant against him for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide – is scandalous.

The global community must stop making justice exceptional. Victims in Sri Lanka, Colombia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Israel and Gaza deserve justice as much as people in Libya.

Alongside the need for justice, the unlawful use of weapons against peaceful demonstrators in Libya has starkly demonstrated the urgent need for robust controls on the international trade in arms. An effective Arms Trade Treaty is essential.

Governments in the Middle East and North Africa must have the courage to embrace a changing human rights landscape; to uphold the rights to peaceful expression and association; and to pursue wide-ranging reform.

They must ensure equality for all their citizens. There is a real danger that women's equality will be pushed aside. Women deserve better, and their equality must be prioritized.

The security forces and the secret police should be reined in; the violence and killing brought to an end; and there should be full accountability for abuses.

Even where progress seems more hopeful, as in Egypt and Tunisia, ensuring human rights after decades of repression will take time and determination. We have already seen the post-Mubarak government in Egypt detaining women protesting in Tahrir Square, subjecting them to virginity tests and threatening to charge them with prostitution.

The period of euphoria when repressive governments fall soon meets the reality that dethroning a dictator is only the first step in dismantling the machinery of oppression.

50 years ago this month, Amnesty International founder Peter Benenson turned an ancient Chinese proverb – “Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness” – into a human rights rallying call.

Developments over the last half-century have been nothing less than a human rights revolution – a huge cultural, social and political shift in which the call for freedom, justice and dignity has evolved into a global demand that grows stronger every day.

The communities most affected by abuses are the real driving force behind this revolution. But through groundbreaking movements for social change such as Amnesty International, people can make a vital difference.

Amnesty International began as an international movement in which members wrote or acted on behalf of prisoners of conscience – those imprisoned simply for their peaceful opinions – no matter in what country they lived in.

Today social media is re-energizing that sense of being a global citizen and of speaking truth to power. It is clearer than ever that change is possible. The genie is out of the bottle and the forces of repression cannot put it back.

Thank you.