

**Testimony of
Assistant Secretary Tom Malinowski
Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Bureau**

**Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian
Security, Democracy, Human Rights and Global Women's Issues
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Chairman Rubio, Ranking Member Boxer and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to describe how the *Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Bureau* (DRL) works to promote human rights and fundamental freedoms in closed societies. We are grateful for the continued encouragement and support from this Committee.

As you know, Secretary Kerry recently released the annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, which provides an assessment of human rights conditions in countries around the world. When releasing the report, Secretary Kerry noted that we have seen important democratic gains in such countries as Vietnam, Tunisia, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and Burma, though in each there are challenges that still need to be overcome. He also pointed out, however, that in many countries in the world, there are still major challenges. Seventy-two countries saw increased persecution of civil society, crackdowns on freedom of expression, and restrictions on the rule of law. Members of religious minorities are persecuted for their faith. Human rights activists are harassed, detained, abducted, and even killed for speaking out. Physical threats by state and non-state actors against journalists and editors reporting on corruption and other abuses are on the rise.

As daunting as these challenges are, countless human rights defenders and civil society organizations are courageously working to push back. We must continue to support them. DRL supports these efforts in large part through the Human Rights and Democracy Fund (HRDF) within the Democracy Fund account. HRDF has grown from \$8 million in FY 1998 to \$88.5 million in FY 2016 thanks to the generous support of Congress, including this committee. Our annual global HRDF budget request is not broken down by region. That is deliberate. DRL reacts to target democratic opportunities and challenges as they arise. By looking at our funding historically, you can see that we do operate in closed or restricted societies in all regions of the world. This past year we managed nearly 350 grants

totaling almost \$500 million that benefit civil society and activists around the world in their struggle for freedom and dignity.

DRL has adjusted operating procedures and applied lessons-learned to our approach in light of ongoing repression of civil society worldwide. Doing so has enabled us to continue our work even in the least hospitable environments. We employ methods aimed at protecting the identity of our beneficiaries. 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 or beneficiaries.

Our key priorities in FY17 include work in authoritarian states such as Russia and China, and in transitioning countries such as Burma and Tunisia. We promote freedom of religion and conscience, fight corruption and cronyism, work to break strangleholds on access to free and credible information, combat threats against labor activists and journalists, promote worker rights and inclusive economic growth, respond to gender-based violence, promote citizen participation in electoral processes, and address the shrinking space for civil society. These initiatives are an important tool to promote long-term stability.

The majority of DRL programming is implemented in repressive, authoritarian, or transitioning countries, including where the United States has no diplomatic presence. The HRDF functions like a “venture capital fund for freedom.” DRL administers programs that enable us to be flexible, adaptable, and responsive to complex and changing situations on the ground.

Thirty governments and private sector donors now help to fund our human rights initiatives, including aiding embattled frontline NGOs, countering cyber-attacks on activists, and assisting vulnerable populations. These unique partnerships not only expand available funding, but generate broader, coordinated diplomatic support for activists. We also make sure that our programs are well coordinated with USAID and NED. USAID participates in DRL’s proposal review panels.

Some of our key programming efforts include:

Internet Freedom

One of our major HRDF programming areas is Internet freedom. Governments in countries such as China, Cuba, and Russia devise new ways of

tracking and blocking online expression. In response, we support programs to assist those seeking to exercise their rights online with the tools and capacity to communicate securely and freely with one another and the outside world.

Since 2008, DRL has programmed over \$105 million in grants that defend and promote a free and open Internet worldwide. These Internet freedom programs have helped millions around the world. The battle for Internet Freedom is now being waged on a global stage between those who support an open Internet and those who see it as a tool of control. In recent months, the cold war between these two sides has reached a critical tipping point. Those who oppose a free and open Internet are devoting extraordinary technical and financial resources to further exert their control over cyberspace.

DRL has developed a high impact, low cost approach to increase the free flow of information and to deny a government's ability to track, censor, and disrupt communications. We support the development and distribution of technology that provides uncensored access to content, tools that increase the digital security of activists, advocacy resources for human rights defenders, and research on where and how Internet controls are being applied. This approach also helps to hold accountable those who perpetrate and facilitate abusive activities.

Supporting Marginalized Populations

DRL has programs that provide direct assistance to members of religious minorities, women, persons with disabilities, and the LGBTI community.

In Nigeria, DRL supported the creation of a network of religious leaders from among the Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim communities who collaborate to encourage peaceful, interfaith coexistence and reconciliation. Through media campaigns, trainings, performances, and town hall events, the program has empowered thousands of community members to become active leaders with knowledge of conflict de-escalation strategies. As a result, former partisans with a history of engaging in sectarian violence have become peer educators and advocates for intercommunal tolerance. These young men and women have documented cases in which their action has prevented the kind of violent interactions that lead to loss of life, community instability, and reprisal attacks.

We also support efforts to combat anti-Semitism. For example, our funding supported coalition building and advocacy training with Hungarian NGOs to create a consolidated voice in advocating against anti-Semitism. This coalition was part

of a broad, successful effort to oppose the erection of a statue to honor Balint Homan (the notorious anti-Semitic minister of religion and education, who co-sponsored legislation that stripped Hungarian Jews of their citizenship rights leading to mass deportation to Auschwitz). They continue the fight against anti-Semitism and all forms of hate.

The Gender Based Violence Emergency Response and Protection Initiative (GBVI) provides urgent assistance to survivors of egregious forms of gender-based violence. It helps provide critical medical, psychological, and social support as well as shelter and legal assistance. The Initiative also supports integrated training for governments, the judiciary, and key elements of civil society in implementing laws that address GBV. In 2016, trainings will be conducted in Thailand, the Philippines, South Africa, and Turkey.

In response to the kidnapping of 276 girls by Boko Haram, through the GBVI we funded an Early Warning System in Northern Nigeria, which uses communications technology to reduce response times to rebel attacks on villages from several days or weeks to within hours of threats and outbreaks. In Iraq, the GBVI provided emergency assistance, including medical, psychosocial support, and livelihood assistance to 145 survivors, including Yezidi, that were formerly held captive by Da'esh.

Our work through the Global Equality Fund is also supported by 20 like-minded governments and private sector partners to support civil society organizations promoting the human rights of LGBTI persons around the world. This support has helped over 120 LGBTI human rights defenders who are under threat be able to continue their courageous work. Nearly 500 activists received training to enhance their ability to respond to the violence affecting LGBTI communities.

Rapid Response

DRL has the ability to respond to issues in a matter of days. We have vastly expanded our capacity to assist threatened human rights activists and organizations by providing them small infusions of support – to allow them to continue their work in safety. Emergency assistance to human rights activists attacked or under threat includes paying the costs of temporary relocation, installation of surveillance cameras, and medical, legal, psychosocial, and other support services. Since 2007, DRL rapid response/emergency assistance programs have assisted more than 3,300 people and organizations in more than 98 countries.

Five years ago we launched the *Lifeline: Embattled Civil Society Organizations Assistance Fund* to offer emergency grants to civil society organizations advancing human rights. Sixteen other governments and two foundations have since provided support for the Lifeline Fund. It has provided emergency assistance to more than 800 civil society organizations in 88 countries and territories. For example, in Kunduz, Afghanistan, the Taliban specifically targeted independent radio stations. The fund provided emergency assistance to stations that had been looted and destroyed, allowing almost ten stations to get back on the air and continue their broadcasts.

Anti- Corruption

People around the globe demand greater governmental transparency and accountability. In partnership with USAID, DRL supports the Open Government Partnership, which is a global initiative that aims to secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance. Since 2011, OGP has grown from eight countries to 69, including Sri Lanka and Tunisia where new governments are developing national action plans in partnership with civil society to advance public sector integrity and key reforms.

DRL is also supporting transparency and anti-corruption watchdogs and cross-border investigative reporting that exposes emblematic cases of corruption. Our programs operate at both the national and the regional levels, connecting activists and journalists to facilitate the flow of best practices.

In Central America, a regional program trains journalists' to investigate failures of government accountability and instances of corruption. Journalists who participated in this program went on to expose embezzlement and had their stories picked up by several media organizations.

In Pakistan, 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 on how to conduct credible national security investigations, while at the same time protecting their personal security. 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.

Transitional Justice & Atrocity Prevention

Around the world, legacies of atrocities cast a shadow on transitions from repressive regimes to participatory and democratic forms of governance. As part of the Department's commitment to Presidential Study Directive 10 and the interagency efforts on Atrocity Prevention, DRL has developed a number of tools to contribute to U.S. efforts in this regard. To address impunity for past atrocities, DRL created the Global Consortium for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation (the Consortium). The Consortium creates programs to address local needs. For example, a \$1.6 million project enables Iraqi civil society to document human rights violations and abuses and violations of international humanitarian law committed by all sides of the current conflict with Da'esh. It establishes protocols and a repository that collects, organizes, preserves, and analyzes evidence gathered to serve a wide range of future transitional justice purposes. It also connects local documentation efforts with the Iraqi judiciary and traditional justice practices. To date, 29 representatives from Iraqi civil society organizations participating in the project have collected over 600 narratives from victims and witnesses of atrocities committed in Iraq. The Consortium can also respond rapidly to emerging needs in post-conflict contexts. For example, partners have responded to requests for rapid technical assistance to address issues of missing and disappeared persons in Ukraine and now Colombia.

DRL's grantee focusing on mass graves excavation has designed a refresher training course to strengthen the ability of partners from the Iraqi Ministry of Martyrs and Anfal Affairs, the Medico-Legal Institutes, criminal investigative and judicial agencies to recover and process human remains in accordance with international standards. This training package has been delivered in Erbil, allowing the relevant Kurdistan Regional Government officials to deploy to Sinjar, where many of Da'esh's atrocities took place, and begin work. DRL grantee staff will mentor and support the process.

In the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a DRL-supported Early Warning System received reports that helped foil rebel attacks on villages that are home to approximately 150,000 people. The early warning system demonstrates how communications technology can reduce response times from several days or weeks to within hours of threats. It can also ensure that responders

deliver coordinated and comprehensive assistance. The provincial government in this area of the DRC is now funding and managing the system on its own.

China

In China, the Communist Party's monopoly on power remains absolute. Growing numbers of people seek justice, an accountable and transparent government, and the ability to express themselves freely and to peacefully assemble and associate. The Chinese government has expanded its crackdown on human rights lawyers and their associates, civil society organizations and activists, friends and relatives of activists, everyday people expressing themselves online or seeking to practice their faith free of state control, and even foreigners and foreign organizations working on human rights issues. In Tibetan and Uighur areas, authorities have increased restrictions on fundamental freedoms.

DRL funds targeted projects that bolster civil society organizations seeking to improve respect for human rights in China. For example, DRL programs build the capacity of public interest lawyers. Other programs work to protect persons belonging to religious and ethnic minorities and persons with disabilities, and those pressing for government adherence to international human rights. Additionally, DRL programs in China strengthen the advocacy skills of grassroots civil society groups, and take advantage of technological developments to enable greater freedom of expression.

Russia

The United States' commitment to engaging Russian civil society remains firm despite the enactment of laws and practices in Russia that restrict fundamental freedoms. Although the Russian government imposed restrictions on civil society organizations receiving international support, 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. These include 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 democracy, justice, and human rights, including fighting corruption and creating a more pluralistic and participatory society with viable, independent, and accountable institutions.

As part of our government's efforts to counter Russian intervention in Eastern Europe, DRL programs assisted people in the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine by facilitating their access to objective and accurate information about Russia's occupation of Crimea, Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine, attempts to destabilize the new Ukrainian government, and the elections. Over 200 Ukrainian and foreign journalists working on Crimea had better access to impartial and accurate information about the situation in the peninsula. They also had a safer workplace for preparing their materials and filing them to their editors. In addition, 59 media outlets in the eastern and southern regions received small grants and produced 857 media reports. 105 journalists received needs assessments and digital security training to allow them to continue their work safely and securely.

Burma

The United States policy of principled engagement in Burma encouraged leaders to undertake democratic reforms. Since May 2013, DRL support has enabled the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners to provide mental health counseling to more than 1,000 released political prisoners, family members, and victims of torture in Burma. Helping these courageous people reintegrate into Burmese society has furthered their continued participation in Burma's political transition. A strong civil society must serve as Burma's moral compass as the country confronts challenges of bigotry and prejudice. These lessons apply to other authoritarian environments. The dividends from our assistance may not show immediately, but can deliver meaningful long-term change.

Tunisia

During my trip to Tunisia last year, one of the key needs my interlocutors identified was strengthening the parliament. Parliamentarians, who have no staff, sought access to the resources and expertise they need to draft and review legislation. We are in the process of establishing a new program to provide members of parliament non-partisan and credible resources to further democratic reforms, including in the areas of human rights and rule of law. The program will ensure that parliamentarians have access to a library of country-specific materials, including fact sheets, briefing materials, research papers, statistical profiles, and other forms of short, written analyses, to enhance their ability to effectively engage on key reforms.

The 2015 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, comprised of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), the Tunisian

Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts, the Tunisian Human Rights League, and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers. The award cited its “decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia in the wake of the Jasmine Revolution of 2011.” The Quartet’s work demonstrates the important role trade unions can play in helping to build and maintain democratic institutions. The labor movement in Tunisia, and UGTT in particular, played a critical role moving Tunisia from dictatorship to democracy. It effectively promoted and mediated peaceful dialogue between citizens, political parties, and authorities. DRL supported the UGTT’s Women’s Committee campaign and its efforts to increase women’s representation in decision making union structures. UGTT women activists played a prominent role in get out the vote campaigns for the national elections. A current DRL supported program in Tunisia aims to formalize Tunisia’s large informal sector so that workers might access decent work and government-mandated protections.

Western Hemisphere

The Western Hemisphere presents new opportunities as well as longstanding challenges. Throughout the region, despite restrictions on freedom of expression and association, citizens have used the democratic process to change the status quo. The people of Argentina chose a new government committed to supporting human rights and democracy in the hemisphere. We look forward to working with the new government of Argentina on the most pressing issues in the region. The Venezuelan people used their parliamentary elections to overwhelmingly reject the course their ruling party had set. We urge the Maduro administration to cease its efforts to restrict the powers of the National Assembly and instead to enter into a dialogue with it. The release of political prisoners would be a welcome preliminary step. The people of Bolivia voted to reject removing term limits from the constitution. We believe these democratic manifestations have been possible in part due to the strong support the United States has shown for those in each of these countries who have worked to counter efforts to undermine democratic institutions. And that effort must continue, including in Ecuador, where criminalizing dissent is a frequent strategy for silencing opposition.

Across the hemisphere, people have also exercised their right to peacefully assemble and demand an end to corruption and impunity. In Guatemala, public outcry supported the efforts of the Public Ministry and the Commission to Combat Impunity in Guatemala that led to criminal corruption charges against the now former president and vice president. Current corruption and impunity challenges in Guatemala are intrinsically linked to past human rights violations and abuses. A

DRL program supported the identification of 97 victims of Guatemalan atrocities. This information was used as principal evidence in the unprecedented arrest of 14 military officers for crimes against humanity, including those involving enforced disappearance, murder, and torture.

DRL strengthens the capacity of local organizations to record and report threats and violence against human rights activists, including labor leaders. In Guatemala and Honduras, DRL programs have bolstered national networks of labor unions, rural worker organizations, and non-governmental organizations. This has generated coordinated mechanisms for identifying violent incidents and demanding government responses. A DRL-supported project in Guatemala is assisting a major coffee company in mapping its supply chain. After conducting over 300 interviews of internal migrant workers, the project implementer is providing the company with increased visibility into the coffee supply chain, its associated workforce, and recruitment abuses by tagging “red flags” that will be linked to specific labor brokers and suppliers.

We are also committed to supporting the people of Cuba as they seek the basic freedoms that their government denies. During his visit to Cuba in March, President Obama spoke openly to Cubans about the importance of freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly. He called for free and fair elections, and pledged U.S. support for these aims. He also met with many brave activists who are struggling to promote democracy and human rights on the island. He emphasized that Cuba’s future is for the Cuban people to design.

Consistent with this message, DRL programs in Cuba respond to the needs and wishes of the Cuban people, by promoting human rights, facilitating the flow of uncensored information, and strengthening independent civil society. Cuban government restrictions on civil and political rights increase the degree of difficulty of program implementation. But despite these challenges, DRL has been able to sustain consistent support to Cuban civil society for the past 10 years, and we will continue to do so with your support. As the President has made clear our new approach to Cuba is not based on the premise that the human rights situation there has improved; rather it is based on the belief that we will be better able to support the demands of the Cuban people if we keep the focus on the Cuban government’s policies rather than allowing the regime to blame American policies for its problems.

CONCLUSION

When taking stock of the challenges at hand, some fear democracy is in retreat. I would argue, however, that these challenges are a reaction to the rising demands of people from every culture and region for governments that answer to them.

Governments that protect human rights and fundamental freedoms are more stable, successful, and secure than those that do not. American workers are better off when their counterparts abroad can stand up for their basic rights. The United States finds its strongest partners in governments that act in the broad interests of their own people, rather than the narrow interests of the few.

We must continue supporting civil society and pressing governments to halt arbitrary detentions and uphold freedom of expression.

This is the work of decades, not days. But, we must also seize opportunities to make an immediate difference for democracies under threat or in countries in transition. As the 2015 National Security Strategy affirms, “America is uniquely situated—and routinely expected—to support peaceful democratic change.” Careful stewardship of the resources allocated to DRL enables us to advance U.S. foreign policy priorities in this regard, and we stand ready to do our part.