

Putting Human Rights First

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Alex Neve
Secretary General
Amnesty International Canada

I'm going to start by taking us far from here – to an isolated corner of central Africa. Over the past 4 years I have been on 4 Amnesty International fact-finding missions to Chad, a forgotten and overlooked country of 10 million people in the middle of Africa. A country that most Canadians have likely never heard of or at least would know little about. Since gaining their independence from France over fifty years ago the people of Chad have suffered through decades of horrible human rights violations. They have endured war. They have been ruled by a series of cruel military dictators. They have lived in deep poverty. But they have survived, for Chad is also a land of determination, resilience and hope.

I first went to Chad at the end of 2006 because the terrifying war and humanitarian crisis that has devastated Darfur, had begun to spill over into the eastern part of Chad. Chad shares a 700 kilometre long border with Sudan's troubled Darfur region, a border over which people, trade and agriculture have long flowed back and forth. But the great tragedy we had gone to investigate was that it was now war, weapons and deadly militia groups that were crossing that border – all of which had unleashed a catastrophe in Chad.

We traveled to Chad in the wake of a relentless wave of attacks, led by notorious Janjawid militia fighters from Darfur, against hundreds of tiny, isolated Chadian villages. Untold thousands of people killed. Crops burned. Livestock pillaged. Homes burned to the ground. In a few short weeks around 75,000 people were uprooted and had nowhere to go. We gathered wrenching stories from people who had fled for their lives only days before our arrival.

I want to share with you, however, what was a bright and shining moment amidst all of this despair and suffering. I want to tell you about the people of Djorlo. Djorlo was a village of about 1000 people. And it had been the target of a particularly vicious attack just 10 days before we arrived in region. 45 people were killed during the fighting. Everyone else fled, to a place about 50 kilometres away. They ran and ran until they found a place that offered a bit of shelter, amidst some trees that had taken root in the middle of a sandy, windswept plain. They had nothing, or next to nothing with them – but did the best they could to make shelter by draping sheets of cloth in the trees, and began figuring out how they would find food and water to get them through the days. All the while they lived in constant fear of another attack, as marauding militia groups were still in the area.

That is where we came across the people of Djorlo. I can't imagine coming into a community at a more difficult time. Grieving so many deaths. Homes destroyed. Uncertain about survival. Terrified of being attacked. Yet when we arrived, we were received with nothing but grace and patience. Village elders took the time needed to answer our questions, providing details of the attack and their attackers and of course the names and details of those who had been killed.

We came back to sit with the people of Djorlo 3 different times. And later, we were able to travel to the ruins of their village, and see firsthand the extent of the destruction that had robbed them of their lives and livelihoods.

Our last visit with them was a brief one. We had just a handful of final questions and needed only to drop by for about ½ hour. And because our days were so packed, we had crammed this visit in at the end of the day – at dusk, something we generally avoided because we did not want to be out when it was dark, for security reasons.

It was about 6 p.m. as we approached. At that time of day, in that part of Africa, dark descends very quickly. And it did. By the time we were driving across the open expanse leading up to their site it had become pitch black. We had the windows in our Land Rover down because of the heat. And we started to hear what at first was a low, but sure, murmuring sound. It grew louder as we approached and started to sound almost musical, like chanting – floating on a gentle African desert breeze. We could see as well that there were a number of fires burning in

the distance. At first they were only pinpoints of light. But by the time we drove into the site we could see that they were blazing bonfires, six of them. And sitting in circles around those fires were all of the children of the destroyed village of Djorlo – probably around 200 kids, ranging maybe from 5 to 16 years old.

And what they were doing was -- going to school. They were learning. At each fire there were a handful of adults who were clearly leading lessons. Older kids were helping out as well, teaching the younger ones. They were doing it with nothing other than sticks to write and draw with in the sand. And they were doing so even though just 10 days earlier they had lost everything, and had seen loved ones killed in front of them. They were doing so even though they still lived in fear of another attack and did not know where tomorrow's food would come from. But still, in the midst of all that worrying and suffering they knew how important it was to keep learning. And that it was in their hands to make sure that happened. One of the most important of all human rights is the right to education. And the people of Djorlo were taking action to make sure that treasured right was protected and upheld.

I cannot tell you how powerful, how absolutely humbling that moment was. We stood at a distance and watched in quiet wonder, not wanting to say or do anything that would disturb the magic around those fires. I wish I could bring you all there with me, even just for a few minutes. Because I know that in just a few short minutes you would see, hear and feel just how precious and wonderful it is to be able to learn. And you would be inspired beyond your imagination by the resilience of the human spirit, by the hope and the deep faith in tomorrow that was gathered around those six fires.

We did eventually have to intrude; as we did have our questions to ask. I had a chance to share my sense of awe with one of the men who had been helping at one of the fires. I told him that I was astounded to see that they were still able to find the time and resolve to organize classes given the enormity of the challenges they were facing. And he said back to me learning is the last thing we can give up now. Learning is the only thing that will ensure that we have some peace and stability in our lives.

So why did I take you off to those blazing fires in a forgotten corner of Africa?

First, here I am in a place of learning. And I know that you will be touched and bolstered by those fires of learning. It reminds us, of course, that education is a right, and a fundamentally important one at that. But despite being enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights more than sixty years ago, that right is far too often an empty promise – for in today's world, for so many, it is sadly still a gift, not a right. A hard-won gift that can open doors to a better life, or can keep those doors firmly shut.

The other captivating lesson I took from the people of Djorlo on that magical night reminded me of the powerful words of Mahatma Gandhi which I take to truly be the mantra of the human rights movement: be the change you want to see in the world. I know that Gandhi would have been impressed – the people of Djorlo were regrouping; but not to mount a counter attack. They were regrouping to teach and learn. They were working to make sure that even in a time of great hardship their children could and would still be able to gather around those fires. They knew the change that could come through learning. They were determined to make that change happen.

And all over the world, from Djorlo to Edmonton and points in between, it is the power of ordinary women, men and young people wishing change and working for change that leads to change. And that is the very essence of human rights.

Governments have made a magnificent set of human rights promises to the world's people over the past 60+ years, going back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN in 1948. The promises go to the heart of what it is to live our lives in dignity and what it is to live in community with others.

- that no one, ever, should be tortured
- that men and women should be treated in complete equality
- that it is impermissible to discriminate against someone because of their race, religion, nationality, or sexual orientation
- that all children should have the right to free elementary school level education
- that people should be able to freely express their views and hold their own individual opinions

- that everyone should have access to basic levels of life-sustaining health care
- that in times of war no one is ever allowed to deliberately attack civilians
- that no refugee should ever be sent back to a country where his or her life is at risk

They are beautiful words. But we know also that there remains a terrible gap between the beauty and promise of those words and the lived reality for so many women, men and young people around the world. Because obviously this is not yet a torture free world, where men and women are treated equally, where no black woman, Muslim man or gay teenager ever experiences discrimination, where children in Edmonton and children in Chad have the same ability to go to school, where no one ever goes to jail because they write an article that criticizes a repressive politician, where treatment for life-destroying diseases like HIV/Aids is equally available to everyone, where bombs never fall on the homes of ordinary families, and where refugees are always welcome and never sent back to danger?

Not yet. But it can be. Must be. And that is about us. We have to make sure that gap between promise and reality disappears. We have the responsibility to do so – we have that responsibility simply because we are members of the global human family.

But we don't just have the responsibility. We have the ability, the power to bridge that gap.

That is the vision that is at the heart of my own organization, Amnesty International, which marks its 50th anniversary this year. It began small. Great things often do. 50 years ago, sitting on a park bench in London, England. A British lawyer – Peter Benenson, read a brief news article in his morning paper that reported that 2 students in Portugal – 1961 was a time of cruel military government in that country – had been arrested and sent to prison simply because they stood up in a Lisbon cantina and raised their glasses of wine in a toast to freedom. He read the article and felt outrage.

But he also knew that there would be millions of others around the world who would feel that same sense of outrage – and the surely, if it could just be possible to gather up that collective

outrage, from cities and villages, schools and workplaces around the world – couldn't it, wouldn't it become a tremendous, irresistible force for change, force for justice.

In 1961 Peter Benenson simply called on people to join their voices of outrage by writing letters. Over the 50 years since, voices have been joined together through petitions, by gathering in town squares, by linking hands around a prison, by sending faxes, by holding candlelight vigils, by passing out information in shopping malls, giving talks at school, being interviewed in the press, meeting with their political representatives, protesting in front of legislatures, typing a name on an internet petition and clicking the share button on Facebook.

And what that of course tells us is that over the course of the 50 years since Peter Benenson got mad on a park bench, a global human rights movement has been born. Millions upon millions of women, men and young people are active right around the world, educating, researching, learning about, protesting, organizing, document and just plain talking about human rights.

In every corner of this planet people clamour for human rights on a daily basis – for their own rights, the rights of friends and neighbours, and the rights of strangers halfway around the world. And their power and might is considerable. Behind all of the great achievements of the past fifty years lie millions of voices that refused to be silent in the face of injustice. Often they speak out at great risk. But they know the greater risk of turning away.

There is so much to inspire us to be part of that global movement, because even though these have been years and decades of great human rights tragedies, the world has certainly seen immense human rights change over these past 50 years:

- unprecedented treaties dealing with such crucial human rights concerns as women's equality, racial discrimination, and torture;
- the end of the cruelty of apartheid in South Africa;
- the dismantling of totalitarian regimes in eastern Europe;
- the downfall of brutal military governments in many parts of Latin America and Africa;
- governments agreed to ban land mines;
- they made it illegal to force children to be soldiers;

- they created a groundbreaking new world court to bring the world's worst human rights violators to justice; and
- along the way so many individuals rescued from abuse, too numerous to count, prisoners of conscience released from their jails and others spared from torture chambers or death row.

All of that change came about because people worked hard to make it so. They did so in their schools, their neighbourhoods, their cities, around the world. It was their voices – thousands, millions of voices – joining together that unleashed change.

But there is still so much we face. Because there is certainly no denying it: we live in a world of enormous human rights challenges. I see it in some of my recent travels.

Last year I made three trips to Guantanamo Bay to observe proceedings in the case of Omar Khadr, the Canadian citizen apprehended by the US military when he was a 15 year old child soldier, over nine years ago. Younger than many of you here today. Also down there were 2 Edmonton lawyers, Dennis Edney and Nate Whitling, who have worked tirelessly over many years to defend Omar Khadr's rights.

His case is a human rights travesty by any measure. And I find it difficult to decide whether I am more enraged by the outright violations he has suffered at the hands of his US captors or the disgraceful way he has been abandoned by his own Canadian government. His abandonment is particularly galling coming from Canada, a country that just a decade ago led the world's efforts to come up with strong new international laws protecting child soldiers.

More recently in June I led an urgent Amnesty International research mission to the country of Cote d'Ivoire, in West Africa. Once one of the most promising countries in Africa, nearly ten years ago bitter political and ethnic divisions sparked a bitter civil war that led to widespread human rights violations. The situation has deteriorated again dramatically over the past 8 or 9 months when intense fighting in the aftermath of a highly contentious presidential election subsumed a large densely populated part of the country's largest city, Abidjan and led to

terrible massacres in the country's isolated western reaches. Hundreds, possibly thousands have been killed. At its peak 1.5 million people were forced to flee from their homes. There has now been a change in president, but our research showed that the violations continue – just that the other side is now pulling the trigger and giving the orders. That trip to Cote d'Ivoire certainly reminded me just how tenuous and fragile human rights are.

And then how about looking closer to home? We must open our eyes to such glaring human rights tragedies as the decades of alarming violence and discrimination faced by Indigenous women and girls across Canada. A First Nations woman in this country is five times more likely than any other woman to die from violence. Five times. That reminds us that we need not look far to come face to face with injustice. And if you want to add your voice to those of thousands of other voices across Canada insisting that it is time for aboriginal women and girls in Canada to be able to live in safety and dignity, you can join a vigil this Saturday starting at the Alex Taylor School gymnasium on Jasper Avenue, at 1 p.m.

So while there have been many resounding victories, we obviously still face daunting challenges. Does that tell us that we give up? Not at all. What it tells us is that we need more voices, more insistent voices – so that the global chorus for human rights is united, universal and is heard at every turn, every corner – every place of cruelty, every time there is an act of injustice, everywhere that the wrenching stink of extreme poverty rears its ugly head.

And what greater affirmation of that could we ask for than the spectacular chorus of voices, so very many of them the voices of youth, that have joined together and forced unimagined democratic and human rights change in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya; and unleashed the possibility of similar change in Syria, Bahrain, Yemen and so many other countries across the Arab world. Seemingly out of nowhere, spurred on by facebook and twitter, yes, but at its heart simply an awe-inspiring example of the power of collective human courage and determination.

What has been unleashed across North Africa and the Middle East can be unleashed elsewhere. We need the voices. Voices determined to speak up for their own rights and voices determined to speak out about the rights of others. Your rights. Their rights. Your voice. Your legacy.