

Speech of Dr. Shirin Ebadi, Winner of the Roland Berger Human Dignity Award 2009 at the award ceremony on April 21, 2009

Mr. President,
Professor Berger,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honor for me that my legal work has been acknowledged by the Roland Berger Foundation. The Roland Berger Human Dignity Award honors all those in Iran who have fought for human rights and democracy over the past 50 years.

I do not want to miss the opportunity to congratulate the international organization Reporters Without Borders on also receiving the Roland Berger Human Dignity Award. This organization has been fighting for freedom of expression in many countries for years and has made excellent progress in this regard in my own country of Iran. May the conferment of the Roland Berger Human Dignity Award be an effective step in the implementation of the organization's goals.

The right to free expression of opinion is one of the most important principles in human rights and the first step in establishing democracy. Needless to say, freedom of opinion and freedom of speech are vital for oppositionists. After all, partisans and supporters of any regime enjoy every freedom to praise and boast about their governments. It is the opponents of the governments that must be granted the right to express their convictions and beliefs the way they consider appropriate.

Regretfully, the freedom of opinion is limited in many countries of the world. That is why writers, journalists and human activists in those countries are often put into prison or sent into exile or even murdered because of their convictions. Such limitations also exist in my country. For instance, the publication of any book in Iran is only possible with written permission from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. No publisher is allowed to print a book without this official approval. However, even with such permission, sometimes the public prosecutor and the court can refuse to acknowledge it and punish both the author and the publisher. The censorship in Iran is so strong that one can only stand back in wonder. For instance, it is prohibited to publish even the slightest criticism of the constitution of the Islamic Republic in the press, and doing so may lead to the confiscation and closure of the newspaper or magazine involved.

Many Internet sites are filter controlled. Amongst them are those sites that deal with women's rights in Iran. Regretfully, some personal bloggers have been arrested and put into jail. I would like to pay tribute to one of them by name: Amir Reza Mirsiafi. Amir Reza Mirsiafi was a young man who was sentenced to a three-year jail term for publishing a political criticism on one

such Internet site. A couple of days after landing in prison, on March 18, 2008, he died mysteriously.

Under such circumstances it is extremely important that the news of such deplorable occurrences reach the worldwide public soon, and I would like to express my gratitude to the Reporters Without Borders for their assistance in this matter.

Many years ago, my colleagues and I founded the Defenders of Human Rights Center in Iran with myself as its chair. Our goal was the pro bono defense of political detainees and those who were persecuted for their beliefs, and the support of their families. In addition, every three months, the Defenders of Human Rights Center published a newsletter reporting on cases of human rights violations in Iran. Since the government of the Islamic Republic has not granted entry visas to any human rights reporter of the United Nations in the last three years, the Secretary General chose to refer to our newsletter when he was submitting his report on human rights to the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 2008. Thereupon, the General Assembly adopted a resolution in which it accused Iran of violating human rights extensively and systematically. At the same time, it expressed several recommendations for improving the human rights situation in Iran. A couple of days after the issuance of this UN resolution, the office of the Defenders of Human Rights Center was closed and sealed at the behest of the Iranian government. Shortly afterwards, my personal law firm was occupied by a group of hostile people. I called the police, but the couple of police officers who arrived at the scene did nothing except to smile contentedly at the raiders and let them continue with what they were doing.

All these reprisals have not led to any reduction in our activities. They have, however, made the continuation of our struggle difficult. I am confident, though, that the conferment of the Roland Berger Human Dignity Award will help us to reopen the office of the Defenders of Human Rights Center.

It is deplorable that the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran displays such little tolerance for human rights activists. As an example, I would like to mention the case of one of my clients, Mr. Mohammad Sadigh Kabudvand, who was sentenced summarily to ten years in jail just because he had founded the Association of Human Rights Activists in Kurdistan.

My protests and those of my colleagues in Iran are based on the fact that the Iranian government is a signatory to the International Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and has committed itself to honor and respect human rights. Consequently, it must adapt itself as well as its laws and regulations to the criteria of the Human Rights Declaration. Some of the laws and regulations involved cover practices such as stoning, hacking off the hands of thieves, flogging, and executions of minors under 18. These penal laws were ratified and became legally binding upon foundation of the Islamic Republic.

Furthermore, one should mention those unseemly and discriminatory laws that trample on women's rights in Iran. For instance, there are laws according to which a woman's life is only worth half that of a man, or a man's testimony

in court is equal to the testimonies of two women. Such discriminatory laws are abundant.

The Islamic Republic tries to justify the enforcement of such laws and argues that it has to abide by the Islamic Shariah. This line of argument is, however, false since such laws were abolished in most Islamic countries, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Morocco and Tunisia, many years ago. The government of the Islamic Republic and its agencies ought to answer the question whether they alone are capable of comprehending and interpreting the Islamic Shariah and Muslims in other Islamic countries have pursued the wrong path.

Fortunately, we have attained some success in recent years. For instance, we have succeeded in causing laws concerning child custody to be revised in favor of Iranian mothers. Nevertheless, we are fully aware that we still have a troublesome road ahead of us in terms of our human rights goals. At the same time, it is important to note that despite all the difficulties we are facing in Iran, we oppose any military attack or even threat from outside, since in that case the government of the Islamic Republic will embark on renewed suppression of its opponents and nip any critical voice in the bud on the pretext of preserving national security.

We have witnessed how the military invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan has not led to the establishing of democracy and the protection of human rights in those countries. On the contrary, the military actions have contributed to the spread of terrorism, fundamentalism and street violence, and in all these cases the victims have been innocent civilians.

Currently we are confronted with two dangers: terrorism and poverty. These two dangers breed like cancerous cells, and if we do not take appropriate steps against them, very soon we will witness the repetition of our experiences in the twentieth century, the most catastrophic period in the history of humanity. To counter terrorism and poverty, we have no other choice but to identify and secure basic human rights for all people regardless of race, gender, nationality and social standing.

In the hope that the dissemination of human rights may save the world from such a fate, I would like to thank you most sincerely for your attention.