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Human Rights Week 2002

Noam Chomsky

December 28, 2002

Human Rights Week is not much of an occasion in the US, with some notable qualifications. But it does receive considerable attention elsewhere. For me personally, Human Rights Week 2002 was memorable and poignant. The week opened on the eve of Human Rights Day, Dec. 10, at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, where thousands of people gathered to celebrate — though that may not be quite the right word — the tenth anniversary of the Kurdish Human Rights Project KHRP, which has done outstanding work on some of the most serious human rights issues of the decade: particularly, but not only, the US-backed terrorist campaigns of the Turkish state that rank among the most terrible crimes of the grisly 1990s, leaving tens of thousands dead and millions driven from the devastated countryside, with every imaginable form of barbaric torture. The week ended for me in Diyarbakir in southeastern Turkey, the semi-official capital of the Kurdish region, teeming with refugees living in squalor, barred from returning to what is left of their villages, even though new legislation theoretically allows that choice.

I had been invited to Diyarbakir by the Human Rights Association, which does courageous and impressive work under conditions of constant serious threat. The preceding days I spent in Is-

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tanbul at the invitation of the Publishers Association, which was holding its annual meeting and an international book fair, dedicated to peace and freedom; and the public sector union KESK (not permitted to function as a union under harsh laws and state practice), which was holding an international symposium on the same themes. While in Istanbul, I was able to visit the miserable slums where unknown numbers of Kurdish refugees seek to survive the damp cold winter months in decaying condemned buildings: large families may be crammed into a single room with young children virtually imprisoned unable to venture into the dangerous alleyways outside, and older children working in illegal factories to help keep the family alive. They too are effectively barred from returning to the homes from which they were expelled, despite the new legislation that lifts the state of emergency in southeastern Turkey — formally, at least.

The founder and director of the KHRP is also barred from returning to his country. And just to round out the picture, the US is now refusing entry to human rights activists recording and protesting these crimes. A few weeks ago Dr. Haluk Gerger, a leading figure in the Turkish human rights movement, arrived with his wife at a New York airport. INS cancelled his 10-year visa, returning him and his wife at once after fingerprinting and photographing. Dr. Gerger has received awards from Human Rights Watch and the American Association for the Advancement of Science for his outstanding contributions to human rights; his punishment by the Turkish authorities had been singled out by the State Department as an example of Turkey's failure to protect elementary rights. In an open letter to the US Ambassador, the spokesperson of the Freedom of Speech Initiative in Istanbul, protesting this treatment, writes that Dr. Gerger is "a founding member of the Human Rights Association of Turkey" and "an ardent defender of Kurdish rights," who "has written extensively on the issue and has criticized governmental policies," likening "the Turkish government's treatment of the Kurds to Serbia's ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Bosnia," and suf-

fering imprisonment and heavy fines as well as loss of his academic position for his writings on human rights issues.

Colin Powell's State Department has now declared him persona non grata in the United States, adopting the stand of extremist elements in the Turkish military and ultranationalist parties.

The Turkish state, with the hand of the military never hidden, remains harsh and repressive, despite some encouraging changes in recent months. But even superficial contact reveals that Turkish culture and society are free and vibrant in ways that should be a model for the West. Particularly striking is the spirit of resistance that one senses at once, from the caves outside the city walls of Diyarbakir where refugees speak eloquently of their yearning to return to their homes to the urban centers of intellectual life.

The struggle of people of Turkey for freedom and human rights is truly inspiring, not only because of the depth of commitment but also because it seems so natural and without pretense, just a normal part of life, despite the severe threats that are never remote. That includes courageous writers of international renown like Yashar Kemal; scholars who have faced and endured severe punishment for their commitment to tell the truth, like Ismail Besikci, who has spent much of his life in prison for his writings on state terror in Turkey; parliamentarians like Layla Zana, still languishing in prison, serving a 15 year sentence for expressing in her native language her hope that "Kurdish and Turkish people can live peacefully together in a democratic framework"; and many others like them, from all walks of life. They are of course unknown in the US, much like the Latin American intellectuals assassinated by US proxy forces, not to speak of the hundreds of thousands of usual victims — "unworthy victims," in Edward Herman's phrase, because they suffer at the wrong hands: ours.

Dr. Besikci refused a \$10,000 prize from the US Fund for Free Expression in protest against Washington's decisive contribution to terror in Turkey, primarily in the Clinton years, when the US provided 80% of Turkey's arms and Turkey became the leading recipi-

ent of US arms (Israel-Egypt aside) as criminal atrocities escalated. In the single year 1997 alone, US arms flow to Turkey exceeded the combined total for the entire Cold War period up to the onset of the state terror campaign; or as it is called in State Department reports on terror, and in the press, the “successful counter-terror” campaign for which Turkey is to be praised and rewarded. That practice accords with the standard doctrine, by no means unique to the US, that “terror” is what THEY do to US, and “counter-terror” is what WE do to THEM, commonly much worse, and only occasionally retaliation, not that it would be tolerable in that case.

Privileged people in the West should feel humility and shame when observing the courage and integrity of those who live under draconian laws and brutal repression and terror, in no small measure thanks to Western support, and not only condemn the abuses and defend the victims but regularly carry out acts of civil disobedience in protest, at severe risk. They should also feel shame that the KHRP operates in London, not New York, where it belongs, given the locus of responsibility for the crimes. The British record is not attractive, but the primary responsibility, by far, lies here. There is in fact a major Kurdish Center in New York, with many activities and important and highly informative publications (Center for Research of the Kurdish Library, Brooklyn, Vera Saaedpour, director). Its anniversary, however, would not bring together thousands of people in New York. It is known only to those who are concerned with human rights — seriously concerned, that is, as shown by their attitude to their own crimes. It is far more gratifying to wring one’s hands over the crimes of others that we can do little about, or perhaps to contemplate the strange flaw in our character that keeps us from responding to the crimes of others in some proper way (rarely spelled out beyond bold and often mindless declarations). In sharp contrast, the crimes that we could easily bring to an end merely by withdrawing our decisive participation must be buried deep in the memory hole.

relinquished to Colombia its place as leading recipient of US arms. The reason is not hard to discern: Turkish state terror was by then a success, Colombia's was not. Through the 1990s, Colombia had by far the worst human rights record in the Western hemisphere, and was by far the leading recipient of US arms and military training, a correlation that is well-established and would be of no slight concern if it were known outside of scholarship and dissident circles.

Turkey and Colombia share other common features. Each has several million people violently displaced; 2.7 million by now in Colombia, increasing at the rate of 1000 a day, according to the latest reports of the leading human rights organization. These are the numbers internally displaced, not counting those who have fled elsewhere. And Colombia, like Turkey, provides a model of courageous resistance that should be observed with shame and humility by privileged Westerners — particularly those who labor to suppress the continuing atrocities and terror for which we bear responsibility, to efface the disgraceful record of the past, and to erect firm barriers against the threat of exposure of crimes that the general population would not tolerate, were the barriers to be breached.

Uppermost in everyone's minds from London to Diyarbakir and beyond is the feverish determination of the Bush administration to find a pretext for what it believes will be a cheap and politically useful war in Iraq, with Blair trailing loyally behind. In Turkey, popular opposition to the coming war is overwhelming. Much the same is true throughout the region, and in most of Europe and the rest of the world as well. Poll results for the US look different, but that is misleading. It can hardly escape notice that although Saddam Hussein is reviled everywhere, it is only in the US that people are genuinely afraid that if we don't stop him today, he'll kill us tomorrow.

Engendering such fears is second nature to the re-cycled Reaganites at the helm in Washington. Throughout the 1980s they were able to ram through their reactionary agenda, significantly harming the population, by maintaining a constant state of fear. Twenty years ago Libyan hit-men were wandering the streets of Washington to assassinate our leader. Then the Russians were going to bomb us from an air base in Grenada (if they could find it on a map). Meanwhile the awesome Sandinista army was poised only two days marching time from Harlingen Texas, a "dagger pointed at the heart of Texas." And on through the decade. To determine a meaningful measure of domestic support for the coming war, it would be necessary to extricate the fear factor, unique to the US. The results would probably show little difference from the rest of the world.

There is no historical precedent for such enormous popular opposition to a war, and protest against it, before it is even launched (fully launched, to be more accurate).

In the Kurdish areas the general opposition to war is heightened by concern over the consequences for the Kurds. The neighboring countries are likely to intensify domestic repression in the context of war. Similar concerns extend to Kurds elsewhere, including the 4 million who, for the moment, have achieved unusual progress in the northern enclaves of Iraq under the uneasy alliance of Ma-

soud Barzani and Jalal Talabani. Apart from their vulnerability to murderous Iraqi assault in the event of war, and the anticipated Turkish reaction if there is any hint of a move towards meaningful autonomy, more than half are reported to be reliant for survival on the UN "Oil for Food" program, likely to be severely disrupted in the event of war. "Free Kurdistan is like a huge refugee camp," one Kurdish leader commented, dependent on UN-run programs for food and on Baghdad for fuel and power. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees is planning for possible flight of hundreds of thousands to neighboring countries, where they are not likely to receive a warm welcome, and where the prospects for the indigent Kurdish populations are sufficiently grim even without what might lie ahead — or perhaps to camps in northern Iraq that are being constructed by the Turkish army there, according to Turkish sources, a development with threatening portent.

I mentioned a qualification to the lack of attention to Human Right Week here: namely, when human rights violations can be exploited as a weapon against some official enemy, a practice that Amnesty International has bitterly deplored, again in the past few months. Through the 1980s, Human Rights Day was the occasion for impassioned denunciations of the Soviet Union, technically accurate but with extreme cynicism that utterly resists exposure. Human Rights Day 2002 was the occasion for the release by the Jack Straw, British Foreign Secretary, of a Dossier on Saddam Hussein's crimes — accelerated by a few days, as part of the US-UK effort to elicit some hostile Iraqi gesture prior to the crucial Dec. 8 deadline for Iraq's submission of documents on its weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The Dossier was authentic, drawn mostly from reports of human rights organizations on Saddam's horrendous atrocities through the 1980s. Unmentioned, as usual, was the fact that these shocking crimes were of no concern to the US or UK, which continued to provide their friend Saddam with aid, including means to develop WMD at a time when he was vastly more dangerous than today.

In the US, those responsible are now again in office, and instructions are that we are to disregard the criminal record for which they show not the slightest contrition. The current British government was then in opposition, but as journalist Mark Thomas revealed, parliamentary protests against Saddam's crimes from 1988 through the 90s are missing a few names: Blair, Straw, Cook, Hoon,..., that is, the leading figures of the governing party. Thomas also released a letter demonstrating that Straw's discovery of Saddam Hussein's evil nature is quite recent. In January 2001, as Home Secretary, it was his responsibility to rule on pleas for political asylum. He rejected the appeal of an Iraqi who had been detained and tortured in Iraq because the "wide range of information on Iraq" that Straw had at his disposal made it clear that the Iraqi tyrant's courts would not "convict and sentence a person" improperly, and "if there are any charges outstanding against you and if they were to be proceeded with on your return, you could expect to receive a fair trial under an independent and properly constituted judiciary."

But something changed since January 2001, and the crimes that were of no account shock our sensibilities and require war. And we are all supposed to observe this performance with sober approval, if not awe.

I also mentioned that in 1997, US arms flow to Turkey exceeded the combined total for the Cold War years as state terror mounted to levels far beyond anything attributed to Milosevic in Kosovo before the NATO bombing, which was undertaken, we were solemnly informed, because we are so high-minded that we cannot tolerate crimes so near the borders of NATO — only within NATO, where we must not only tolerate but expedite them. 1997 was an important year for the human rights movements in other ways as well. It was the year when the world's leading newspaper informed its readers that US foreign policy had entered a "noble phase," with a "saintly glow." It was also the year when US military aid to Colombia skyrocketed, increasing from \$50 million to \$290 million by 1999, then doubling by 2001 and still increasing. In 1999, Turkey