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Human Rights Day, Bill of Rights Day, and Human Rights Week, 1986

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

On December 15, 1791, our young Nation celebrated the ratification of the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution of the United States, which gave legal form to the great principles our Founding Fathers had set forth in the Declaration of Independence less than a generation earlier. As we celebrate that occasion some 195 years later, it is well to recall those principles, which endure today as they have for nearly two centuries. They endure because they rest on a simple but profound truth, that each of us is created with equal moral dignity, that every individual is endowed by nature and nature's God with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. On this foundation of individual rights and self-government our Founding Fathers created a great Nation, setting it on the course of liberty that continues to this day.

As we look around the world, however, we see a very different history. Some nations, to be sure, have followed a course similar to our own and today enjoy the liberty that we Americans have long cherished. But others have never known genuine liberty, while still others, especially in our own century, have lost the liberty they once enjoyed.

Thirty-eight years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. Yet many of the governments that voted for that Declaration are flagrantly ignoring the principles they affirmed on that momentous occasion. The Soviet Union continues its repression of Catholics in Lithuania and Ukraine, and of other religious activists. Hundreds of thousands of Jews are still being denied the right to emigrate, while Soviet armies, for the seventh year now, have brutally repressed the people of Afghanistan. In Berlin, the world marked the 25th year of a wall built not to protect people but to keep them in their place. In Poland, workers will sadly mark the fifth anniversary of martial law and will mourn those who suffered for their defense of human rights.

Unfortunately, no continent has been spared the pain of human rights violations. In South Africa the manifest injustices of the apartheid system of racial discrimination persist. Refugees continue to flow from the communist nations of southeast Asia. And the world is listening increasingly to the tragic stories of those who have suffered so long in the Cuban gulags just 90 miles from our shores—and in the emerging gulags of Nicaragua.

Yet despite this reign of repression, there is reason for hope. In our own hemisphere in this decade the movement has been toward freedom, not toward repression, as country after country has brought into being the institutions of democracy.

The defense of human rights is a humanitarian concern, and a practical one as well. Peace and respect for human rights are inseparable. History demonstrates that there can be no genuine peace without respect for human rights, that governments that do not respect the rights of their own citizens are a threat to their neighbors as well.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, RONALD REAGAN, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim December 10, 1986, as Human Rights Day and December 15, 1986, as Bill of Rights Day, and I call upon all Americans to observe the week beginning December 8, 1986, as Human Rights Week.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this tenth day of December, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighty-six, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and eleventh.

Ronald Reagan