

International Human Rights House Committee on International Relations

Introduction

The United Nations (U.N.) defines human rights as “rights inherent to all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, language, or any other status.” Universal human rights are expressed and guaranteed by law.¹ However, some countries do not express nor guarantee basic human rights that everyone should have. Critical human rights issues include, but are not limited to, freedom of expression and speech, freedom of religion, right to vote, health, slavery, safe working conditions, counterterrorism, enhanced interrogation, and gender equality.²

In efforts to protect the human rights of people around the world, the United States of America (U.S.) has spent billions of dollars in humanitarian assistance and is the largest government provider of humanitarian assistance. In 2013 alone, the U.S. spent 4.7 billion dollars towards humanitarian assistance. This number is immense compared to the amount that other countries spend towards humanitarian assistance. The second biggest government provider of humanitarian assistance in 2013, the United Kingdom, only spent 1.8 billion dollars. The majority of countries affected by humanitarian assistance lies in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, in countries of unrest such as South Sudan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.³

However, there have been some concerns regarding American humanitarian intervention and assistance. State sovereignty, a major concern for the U.N, is sometimes not recognized when a powerful country such as the U.S. intervenes in a smaller country’s affairs. Additionally, unilateral human intervention, which is military intervention to protect human rights without approval of the U.N. Security Council, can be a problem. One of the greatest examples of unilateral human intervention is the Vietnam War.⁴ According to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 189 which was created in 1964, countries were supposed to respect Cambodia’s neutrality and territorial integrity. However, in 1970, American troops along with the South Vietnamese People’s army invaded Cambodia, receiving several criticisms from people around the world and even American citizens who claimed that the war was hurting more civilians in Vietnam and Cambodia than helping them.⁵

History of the Problem

Our current understanding of humanitarian assistance and international development assistance did not develop until post World War II when Secretary of State George C. Marshall developed the Marshall Plan. Under this plan, the United States helped European countries recover from the war by rebuilding infrastructure, strengthening the economy, and stabilizing the region.⁶ Since then, the level of involvement in international human rights has varied by each president’s foreign policy.

During the Cold War, the U.S.'s humanitarian assistance was manifested through promoting democracy and free markets in order to stop the spread of communism. To lessen the threat of Communism, the U.S. offered development assistance to foreign countries, allowing countries to prosper under a capitalist economy. In turn, the rise in production in other countries also led to more available international trading partners with the U.S.⁷

Democratic Presidents John F. Kennedy and Jimmy Carter offered extended aid in international human rights compared to their predecessors. Kennedy's administration during the 1960s helped several countries with international development assistance. In fact, the 1960s became known as the "decade of development." The growth in international development assistance led to the creation of governmental organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development (U.S.A.I.D.). For Carter's administration, human rights was a central theme as Carter looked to include a new sense of morality into American diplomacy. This administration focused international aid towards basic human needs such as food and nutrition, population planning, health, education, and human resources development.⁸ Carter helped reform oppressive governments in Brazil and Argentina and decreased aid to brutal regimes such as Ethiopia's Mengistu Haile-Mariam. However, foreign aid posed some problems for the United States during the 1970s.⁹ The United States supported the Shah of Iran even while his regime persecuted and executed thousands of Iranians who opposed the monarchy. In 1979 in the Iranian Hostage Crisis, a group of Islamic revolutionaries who opposed the United States for offering support for the Shah took hundreds of American ambassadors hostage. These ambassadors were tortured and were not released until more than a year later.¹⁰

Coming into the 1990s, the U.S. started to question the deployment of troops for humanitarian aid due to an incident in Somalia. In 1992, U.S. troops were sent to Somalia to help the U.N. in humanitarian aid. A year afterwards, a Somali clan killed 18 U.S. Rangers. President Clinton immediately withdrew all troops from Somalia. Somalia soon returned to a dire state. Due to this incident in Somalia, the U.S. was fearful of intervening in the Rwandan Genocide the following year. This inaction by the U.S. was heavily scrutinized by Americans and the rest of the world because the U.N.'s Genocide Convention of 1948 called upon the world community to intervene whenever a genocide occurred.¹¹

The "War on Terror," which refers to the steps towards counterterrorism in response to the 9/11 attacks, is often noted for promoting human rights through humanitarian intervention. In 2001, President Bush deployed troops in Afghanistan to capture Osama Bin Laden, the founder of the terrorist group Al-Qaeda. Additionally, troops were deployed in Iraq in 2003 in efforts to stop terrorism. Also, military action in Iraq was partly supported due to Ba'athist regime's human rights violations. The Ba'athist party executed human rights violations daily by brutally oppressing and torturing the opposition. In addition, the Ba'athist party tried to alter the ethnic composition of Iraq by displacing thousands of Kurds. In the late 1980s, a genocide ensued in Iraq in which several Kurds were killed. However, the Iraqi War contains some points of contention. President Bush claimed that Saddam Hussein, the leader of Iraq and the Ba'athist party, had ties with Al-Qaeda, but many believe there was not enough substantial evidence to make that statement. Moreover, Bush

argued the Iraqis held nuclear weapons that could be used against the U.S.. Yet, no nuclear weapon was found throughout the duration of the war.¹²

Recent Developments on the Issue

Currently, Obama is trying to enhance relations with Cuba in hopes of tackling their issues with human rights violations. In the past, Cuba has been credited with imprisoning several critics journalists. However, in recent years, incarceration rates have been reduced.¹³ The U.S. is in the process of removing its strict sanctions and embargo from Cuba. Also, Cuba was removed from the “state sponsor of terrorism” list in 2015.¹⁴ Obama said, while speaking about improving the human rights of Cuba through better relations, “I do not anticipate overnight changes. But what I know deep in my bones is that if you have done the same thing for fifty years and nothing has changed, then you should try something different if you want a different outcome.”¹⁵

Counterterrorism is currently a major concern for the U.S.. Recently, the Iran Deal was crafted by the U.S. and other countries to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. The deal states that economic sanctions on Iran will end in exchange for more inspections. However, if the deal fails, there may be a call for military intervention in Iran. Moreover, there has been outcry for more military intervention against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (I.S.I.S. or I.S.I.L.). Thus far, the U.S. has conducted airstrikes in Iraq to attack the militant group. The U.S. has also sent humanitarian aid to help victims of I.S.I.S.. However, many believe that the U.S. should do more to combat the group.¹⁶

Democratic Point of View

Most Democrats are in support of international sanctions and meetings instead of military intervention. They also believe in close ties with organizations such as the U.N. and Human Rights Council. At the 28th Session of the Human Rights Council, current Secretary of State John Kerry said, “President Obama believes deeply in the mission of the Human Rights Council, and he recognizes the importance of engagement – U.S. engagement; other engagement – and leadership within the organization. He made the decision to re-engage shortly after he became President because he knew it is vital for the United States and for allies to have a seat at the table as the HRC sets its priorities and implements its agenda.”¹⁷

Republican Point of View

Since most Republicans call for a smaller government, many Republicans wish to cut funds from humanitarian assistance. Some Republicans also call for the U.S. to withdraw from the United Nations, an organization that passes regulations regarding international human rights, because of its ineffectiveness. Conservative presidential candidate Huckabee said while speaking of the U.N, “It’s time to say enough of the American taxpayer’s dollar being spent on something that may have a noble idea, but has become a disgrace!”¹⁸

Conclusion

The U.S. policy on international human rights has developed overtime. During mid-twentieth century, the U.S. provided humanitarian assistance by helping other countries develop and ensuring people had basic human services. Today, the U.S. still remains a huge provider of humanitarian assistance, but it also has shifted its focus to counterterrorism. However, military intervention can always be a point of contention if it is not easily justified or if it hurts state sovereignty.

Questions to Consider

- i. How do we ensure human rights for everyone around the world?
- ii. Should we work to ensure human rights everywhere or only in times when it is our best interest?
- iii. When is military intervention or unilateral humanitarian intervention acceptable?
- iv. What budget should we put towards humanitarian assistance? Should we decrease or increase funding towards humanitarian assistance?
- v. How do we ensure state sovereignty while offering extensive humanitarian aid?
- vi. What human rights issues should we focus on the most? Counterterrorism? LGBT rights? Enhanced interrogation? Freedom of speech? Right to vote?
- vii. A main argument against the Vietnam War was that U.S. troops were hurting more people in South Asia than protecting them. Is this true? Does this argument still apply to areas where the U.S. stations troops today?
- viii. What steps should the U.S. take to counteract terrorism?
- ix. Should the U.S. withdraw from the United Nations?
- x. Following the statements of President Obama on Cuba, could improving relations with countries open the door to fixing human rights violations?

Sources for Additional Research

- <http://www.un.org/en/index.html> This is the link to the official United Nations website. See what work the United Nations does and where the U.S. can assist.
- <http://www.cfr.org/humanitarian-intervention/dilemma-humanitarian-intervention/p16524> Look at controversies that exist with humanitarian intervention.
- <https://www.hrw.org/> The Human Rights Watch's (H.R.W.) official website.
- <https://www.usaid.gov/> The official website of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), an American government agency. See where the U.S. currently sends humanitarian assistance
- <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/> Official website of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

- http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/foreign_aid.aspx This website page offers an extensive background on U.S. foreign aid.
- <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/14/statement-president-iran> Transcript of President Obama's full speech on the Iran Deal.
- <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/03/238065.htm> Transcript of Secretary of State John Kerry's speech at the 28th Session of the Human Rights Council. Kerry speaks in detail about the United States's current stance on international human rights.

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- ⁷Ibid.
- ⁸Lagon, Mark P. “Promoting Human Rights: Is U.S. Consistency Desirable or Possible?” October, 2011. Accessed August 19, 2015. <http://www.cfr.org/human-rights/promoting-human-rights-us-consistency-desirable-possible/p26228>; Ibid.
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- ¹⁰“The Iranian Hostage Crisis.” *Public Broadcasting Service*. Accessed November 1, 2015. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/carter-hostage-crises/>.
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- ¹²“History on the War on Terror.” *EBSCOHost Connection*. Accessed August 19, 2015. <http://connection.ebscohost.com/us/war-terror/history-war-terror>; “Iraq War.”

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¹³“World Report 2015: Cuba.” *Human Rights Watch*. Accessed November 1, 2015. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/cuba>. ; Owen, Cliff. “Obama administration slams Iran and Cuba for Human Rights Abuses.” *CBS News*. June 25, 2015. Accessed August 19, 2015. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-admin-criticizes-iran-and-cuba-for-human-rights-abuses/>.

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¹⁷“Remarks at the 28th Session of the Human Rights Council.” *U.S. Department of State*. March 2, 2015. Accessed November 1, 2015. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/03/238065.htm>.

¹⁸Keating, Joshua. “Huckabee: Kick out the U.N.” *FP*. September 28, 2009. Accessed September 23, 2015. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/09/28/huckabee-kick-out-the-u-n/>.