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Self Examination

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The U.N. special rapporteur on torture and the executive director of the World Peace Foundation told audiences at the University of Dayton this weekend America’s own involvement in human rights violations weakens its influence against rogue regimes.

During keynote addresses at the University of Dayton’s Social Practice of Human Rights conference, Juan Méndez, the U.N. special rapporteur on torture, said U.S. human rights abuses give rogue regimes an out and allow others to downplay U.S. rhetoric on human rights. Alex de Waal of the World Peace Foundation identified the U.S. government’s elevation of its own position as above international law as the source of an international political order increasingly inhospitable to human rights.

"The U.S. government continues to resort to serious human rights violations such as target killings and prolonged arbitrary detentions, and justifies these actions by citing the need to arrest or eliminate persons for national security considerations," Méndez said. "The U.S. has a moral and legal obligation to discover and disclose the truth about torture committed by its agents and to investigate and prosecute those against whom evidence can be found.

"Otherwise, we’re only providing rogue regimes with a ready-made excuse for rejecting international community concerns about their own abuses."

de Waal said he found some of the policies of the administration of President Barack Obama regrettable - and with regard to the proposal to bomb Syria after the use of chemical weapons, said that countering one illegal action with another isn’t a good idea.

"It is rather regrettable for reasons of electoral politics that the Obama administration chose to take as hard a line on defense and security as his predecessor," he said. "You have to think how your actions are understood across the world. When the U.S. president speaks about chemical weapons or weapons of mass destruction, in an Arab country, it's taken with a pinch of salt. You may be convinced it may be true, but it's not taken at face value in the rest of the world, especially the Middle East."

de Waal added that a possible solution is the U.S. engaging other nations rather than taking charge. Solutions lie in peace conferences, not interventions.

"In Syria, it would not have taken much in that situation to actually make a real international red line and get the Iranians and Russians, who were also appalled (by Syria’s human rights violations), on our side, instead of thinking it is the U.S. responsibility to act alone – illegal, political vacuous and lacking that basic sensibility about the fact we live in a world where you have to take account of other people’s views."

Méndez thinks human rights should occupy a central position in the foreign policies of all countries, including the United States.

"But they (human rights) should not be promoted and defended only when they do not risk collision with other foreign policy," Méndez said. "In response, the human rights movement must ensure that torture and other abuses do not become accepted as inevitable."

de Waal echoed Méndez’s challenge and added the American human rights movement will take its place in the vanguard of the global human rights movement when "convening and communication" are the preferred human rights methods to unilateral intervention.

"It is the principal responsibility of the human rights movement, particularly here in the United States in the coming years, to look at misuse of power and place a new focus on what defined human rights movement 200 years ago - the power of convening and communication," de Waal said. "As it challenges the U.S. administration, I would submit the American human rights movement can then take its place in the vanguard of the global human rights movement."

Méndez and de Waal were among current and former representatives from organizations such as the United Nations, Amnesty International USA, Human Rights Watch, WITNESS and Doctors Without Borders participating in the conference at the University of Dayton, Ohio.
University of Dayton Oct. 4-5, which took a critical look at the future of human rights. Méndez was unable to attend because of U.N. duties but gave his presentation via video.

The conference examined topics such as the future of human rights advocacy, the role of media and communications technology in advocacy, integrating human rights and development in practice, and human rights philanthropy.

"Many are familiar with humanitarian aid workers distributing food, medicine and other items, but they are not familiar with those working behind the scenes advocating and lending a voice to those less fortunate," said Mark Ensalaco, University of Dayton director of human rights research. "With some of the top human rights advocates in the world, we explored how to use education, research and dialogue to move human rights advocacy into action."

The conference is part of the University's commitment to establishing a human rights center, University of Dayton President Daniel J. Curran announced on the first day of the conference.

"I would like to compliment the University of Dayton and its president, Daniel Curran, on its initiative to create a human rights center," Méndez said. "I can only underline the valuable role of the academic support such institutions provide to promote the respect for the inherent dignity of all persons through dialogue, advocacy, research and education."

"I fully endorse the mission, work and core principles of the University's (proposed) human rights center and that I support its search for transformative solutions to systemic patterns of injustice in any way possible."

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